Interview with The Honorable Tibor Nagy Jr., 2011

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR TIBOR PETER NAGY, JR.

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Today is the 13th of September, 2010 and this is an interview with Tabor, T-I-B-O-R — do you have a middle name? —

NAGY: P, Peter.

Q: — Peter, Nagy, N-A-G-Y.

NAGY: Junior.

Q: Junior, OK.

NAGY: Because my dad was in USAID (United States Agency for International Development).

Q: Yes, OK. And this is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy. And we're doing this by telephone and you are where?

NAGY: I am at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas.

Q: All right. So let's have at it. Let's start with — and we'll develop from there — where were you born? When and where were you born?

NAGY: I was born in Budapest, Hungary in 1949 and I came to the United States as a political refugee in 1957.

Q: OK, we'll pick that up later. But let's go back. Let's talk about your father's side. What do you know about the family going back as far as you can go, more or less?

NAGY: Well, I have two sides to the family. One side is totally Hungarian, which was my father's side of the family. They had been in Hungary, including the Old Hungary, the pre-World War I borders of Hungary, going back as long as anyone can remember. And the other side of my family were Austrians who were brought into Hungary in the Middle Ages after the deprivations of the Mongols who wiped out I think about 20% of the Hungarian population.

Q: All right. Well, where would you — well, let's go back to the beginning of the 19th century. What was your family up to that, you know, that you had direct connections to?

NAGY: Well, on my mom's side quite a few of the family members were artists and artisans. There was one very famous painter of the Biedermeier period, Austro-Hungarian Biedermeier period. Then there was another quite famous architect who designed a number of the, the more imposing structures, which still stand in Budapest. On my father's side there were more civil servants, including my father having been a high-ranking military officer in the Hungarian Army.

Q: Well, let's take your — when did the — when did the military connection come in?

NAGY: Well, my father was an orphan and came from a very poor family, and about the only way for a poor person to get ahead in Interwar Hungary was through the military. And he did extremely well. He was the youngest officer at his rank at several levels. He

was in the Hungarian Army of World War II on the Russian front. And then he made the transition to the — to the new, quote unquote, “People's Army” of the post-war communist era although he was arrested and charged with being a western agent and came close to being executed, if not for the death of Stalin and his friend assuming the portfolio of the minister of defense he would have been executed. But he was let out of prison, rehabilitated, advanced in rank, and he was a lieutenant colonel at the time that the Hungarian Revolution came along in October of 1956.

Q: Well, did the Hungarian Revolution — were you old enough to be aware of the issues and all at that point?

NAGY: Yeah, I was already at — in second grade, elementary school. So I was very aware of it because we were living downtown in Budapest so we were in the midst of the battles and the tank firing and the big demonstrations and listening to the radio broadcast. So I was vividly aware of what was going on, and especially because my dad was off taking part in the events. I was very concerned.

Q: Where did your father fall into this? I mean what position was he taking?

NAGY: He was in charge of the military engineers in Budapest. So he was extremely involved in the events. Most of the Hungarian Army, along with my father, took the side of the revolutionaries. And my father was very good friends with the general commanding the defense of Budapest (who then went on to have a distinguished career as a US academician, then a Hungarian parliamentarian after the Soviet collapse in 1989.) So my father was very involved, and that's in effect the reason we ended up having to leave Hungary. Because of his involvement.

Q: Well, in your school was there quite a political atmosphere during that period or?

NAGY: Well, yeah, because I mean everything was oriented towards communist propaganda, so in the school we were trained to be little communists. We were part of the — wore the red kerchiefs, the Young Pioneer movements —

Q: Yeah, the —

NAGY: And you know, so, so we received a lot of propaganda. But I was very fortunate because my grandfather was extremely anti-communist so at great peril to himself I did receive the other side of the story, so to speak, when I was growing up.

Q: All right, well let's go to your mother side. What do you know? Where do they come from?

NAGY: They're the ones who, who have an Austrian background, and that's the side of the family we're able to trace to like, 1100. And they initially came from Austria. And they come into Hung — they were brought into Hungary, or they settled in Hungary probably in about the 13th or 14th century when Hungary desperately needed population and the Hungarian king invited in people from mostly the Germanic speaking lands to repopulate after the Mongols left.

Q: Well, I mean just in general from what you were able to get as a kid, how did the Austrian and the Hungarian populations mix? Did one look down on the other or mutual contempt or like or what?

NAGY: Well, you know, Hungary was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, so the two people coexisted to a certain extent. One conflict within — that I had directly was because my father's family was Protestant, my mother's family was Catholic. And at that time for a Protestant to marry a Catholic, the Protestant had to agree that any children born to the union would be raised as Catholics.

Q: Well, how did that work?

NAGY: Well, it worked that when I was born I was raised as a Catholic. But then later on when I had a choice I reconverted to Protestantism.

Q: Well, was there any sort of prohibition about joining a church during the communist period that you were in?

NAGY: It was actively discouraged and of course my dad could not worship, being a military person. But my mom's family was fairly actively religious. And they were not in a position to be hurt by that, so you know my grandparents went to the Catholic mass on a regular basis.

Q: You know, anyone who followed events there, the name Nagy of course comes across as one of the prime ministers, I guess it was, during the communist period was the name Nagy. Was there any relation?

NAGY: No. Nagy is a fairly common Hungarian name, maybe not to the extent of Smith, but something like Baker.

Q: Ah, I gotcha. Well, let's go before the '56 period. What was home life like for you? You had a military artistic household?

NAGY: Well, Hungary, after World War II much of the city residential units were destroyed so residences were very rare. We were — I first lived in my grandparents' home and they were — it's like three families living in the little apartment because of the housing shortage. But then when my dad came back and got out of jail he ended up with an apartment because of his, you know, his military life. Military officers were well treated so we actually had a little apartment. But there was — I remember that there was no hot water, per se, that hot water had to be heated on the stove and in the wintertime there was just one central kind of heating unit in the one room in the apartment and the rest of it was bitterly,

bitterly cold. Budapest was an extremely poor city at the time and infrastructure was not anything like what we're used to now.

Q: Well, how about as a — you went to school, but before going to school was there a chance — I mean were you able, encouraged to read? I mean were you sort of the world opening up to you a bit through reading?

NAGY: The only real side of the world I saw was what I received in school and it was very heavily tilted in favor of the communist propaganda. Again, except for the fact that my grandfather said often that not everything the communists say is true. It was very dangerous at the time to listen to Radio Free Europe, because the — the communists would jam it with a very distinct sound so that your neighbors could know that you were listening to Radio Free Europe. But my grandfather took a real chance and they listened to Radio Free Europe. But my knowledge of the world until we got out to Austria and then on to the United States was extremely limited and it was basically parroting the things that the regime was saying.

Q: Well, looking back on what you were getting until you got out, you had to be getting an education besides the propaganda. Was the world opening up at all there or was it pretty narrow?

NAGY: It was very, very, very narrow.

Q: While you were in, you know, still a kid and all and you were, you know, getting the stuff from your grandfather and all, were you sort of put on injunction to keep your mouth shut when you're out playing with the kids?

NAGY: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. And you know when I got to be around five or six or seven I had good defenses about that.

Q: Did —

NAGY: Because people were encouraged of course to turn each other in.

Q: Yeah. Did you feel that this wasn't a nice place or was this just the way things were?

NAGY: It was just the way things were. It was absolutely just the way things were. And you know the very, very few cars, very few luxuries. I mean it was nothing to compare it to because everybody was poor.

Q: Did you have brothers? Sisters?

NAGY: I had a half brother — I had two half brothers and a half sister. When my dad was in prison, political prison, my mom was told to divorce him or else they would take me away from her and that she would not have a job. And so she took the prudent advice. My dad of course was not expected to come out of prison and when the circumstances changed and came out of prison he was of course not at all happy that his wife had divorced him, but he understood why. And they never remarried. He eventually married another woman.

Q: Was there talk of going to the west at all as before you went to the west or not?

NAGY: No, not at all. As a matter fact, the day we went to the west I was just told that we were going on a picnic in the countryside so if we were picked up by the security police I would not be able to spill the beans.

Q: How did that come about?

NAGY: You mean going to the west?

Q: Yeah.

NAGY: Well, my dad realized that revolution had lost. The regime was, was re-strengthening itself and arresting again. So he knew that it was only a couple of days

before they would come and get him — that he had to leave. So he got his second wife and me and we left on a train in the morning and ended up at a little border village, had a very nice dinner with a farm family, and had a number — a group of other people show up and the farmers took the group of us in the middle of the night across the border and showed us the way to Austria.

Q: How long were you in Austria?

NAGY: We were in Austria from November '56 until about March of '57. I mean the Austrians were absolutely wonderful people because they had only — I think Soviet troops had left Austria only the year before so they were extremely vulnerable. But, but they were, you know, they just opened their hearts up.

Q: Yeah, at that time I was at my first post in Frankfurt as a vice counsel. And we were sort of sitting there wondering whether the Soviets would come through the Fulda Gap and all. It was a tense time.

NAGY: Oh, very, very tense.

Q: Well, how did things develop? Did you have connections in the — or your father have connections in the States or?

NAGY: My, my dad did not. When my dad came out he had contacted the U.S. Embassy and other agencies. So he went through some debriefs there and the Americans suggested that he get out of there as quickly as possible because the Hungarian agents were actively kidnapping people and taking them back to Hungary. So they made arrangements for him to come to the states as quickly as possible, and his second wife and I followed about, you know, several months later. I think my dad was taken out as early as January and his second wife and I followed, like I said I think it was March.

Q: Well, I guess your father would have been what we would call an intelligence target at the time.

NAGY: Oh, absolutely. He was an extremely high value intelligence target.

Q: Yeah, because I, you know, having run a consular section in Belgrade a few years later I — anybody who had rank in the — in one of the east block countries, you know, was obviously of great interest.

NAGY: Oh, absolutely. And then when we got to the States he spent months and months being debriefed.

Q: So you were in Hungary for about — until early '57, was that?

NAGY: I was in Hungary until November '56. It was '49 when I was born, so November of '56. And in Austria from November of '56 until March and then came to the States.

Q: And did you come under some sort of hospices of there were various agencies that, you know, nonprofit agencies like —

NAGY: I came with Care and I was the Hungarian — I think I was the Care poster child for Hungarian relief in 1957. I still have a photo from that. And of course later on when I became ambassador I was — I gave lots and lots of money to Care, you know, through various NGOs (non-government organizations). So you know, there was a really strange full circle.

Q: (laughs) Well, where'd you go?

NAGY: In the States?

Q: Yeah.

NAGY: Well, we first landed in Camp Kilmer, New Jersey where there was a refugee camp set up for Hungarians, but we ended up in Washington DC after a few weeks because my dad was having the debriefings.

Q: Well, Camp Kilmer has — when I was in the military I got my discharge at Camp Kilmer.

NAGY: Oh, my gosh.

Q: Yeah.

NAGY: What a world.

Q: (laughs) You know, garden spot, one of those barracks and all.

NAGY: Oh, my God.

Q: Well, what did your father do?

NAGY: Well, initially of course he couldn't do much at all because none of us spoke any English. So I think when we first got there he unloaded some trucks for Safeway. But then — he was an engineer and an engineering company hired him at a very, very low — I think he was paid a dollar 50 an hour because he had to learn English first. Once he learned English he proceeded to work his way up and eventually he went to work at USAID (United States Agency for International Development) and ended up in Vietnam and Italy and El Salvador and, and Haiti and eventually Sarajevo.

Q: Well, is your father still alive?

NAGY: Yes, we just celebrated his 90th birthday.

Q: How is he, as far as do you think I could do something with him?

NAGY: I — I'd have to ask him. It would be wonderful if you could. I don't know if he'd want to do it or not, but I could ask.

Q: Maybe I could persuade you to do it for us.

NAGY: Well, yeah, maybe so, but I would love for him to be able to do it.

Q: Well, anyway, back to you. Kids — you were how old at this point?

NAGY: Well, I came to — I came to the States when I was seven and I do want to add one thing, that when we were in Vienna it was the American Embassy of course that processed us. I had never — no idea at that time what a diplomat was or what an embassy was, but they were so nice to us that even then I decided that if I ever got to the United States my dream would be to become an American diplomat.

Q: Oh, what a wonderful introduction.

NAGY: Yeah.

Q: Well, how did the process of learning English go for you?

NAGY: It was total immersion. I was basically stuck in Bancroft Elementary School and I learned English in a couple of months.

Q: Yeah, it really is remarkable when you think about it. At an early age, if the kids sink or swim and they almost all swim very nicely.

NAGY: Absolutely. Absolutely. I had no problems at all. I think before I knew — and then Care paid for my way to go to a summer camp, YMCA Camp TF Soles in Pennsylvania that first summer and that kind of put the frosting on the cake because there I really did become fluent in English.

Q: Well, did you find it different to adjust to sort of the American school system of where you could sort of speak up and you weren't particularly getting drilled and things, or not?

NAGY: It was — you know, again, I think children are truly flexible and I made the adjustments no problem at all.

Q: How did this work? Your father was with his second wife.

NAGY: Mm-hmm. But then they eventually divorced. They divorced early. So then it was just my dad and I.

Q: Where were you living?

NAGY: We were living — we lived first in Mount Pleasant in very, very modest quarters and basically rented a room. Then we went from Mount Pleasant to Glover Park in Washington and we were living in Glover Park where I went to Gordon Junior High and Western High School.

Q: Well, let's talk a bit about were you — even in Hungary, were you much of a reader?

NAGY: Yeah. As a matter of fact, we were very much readers. The very first thing I think my dad bought in the United States was a set of used encyclopedias.

Q: Did you read those through?

NAGY: Sure did, and I still have 'em.

Q: Yeah, I had — I worked on something called The Book of Knowledge, which is something of that thing except it's a 1910 addition. I got a lot of misinfor —

NAGY: Mine is like 1943.

Q: Uh-huh. In school, did you find any particular subjects particularly interested you?

NAGY: History, geography, and politics. Absolutely.

Q: Oh, my God. They really — you were indoctrinated — you didn't know it — to be a Foreign Service officer.

NAGY: Absolutely, yep.

Q: What about reading? Did you — early on did you find — once you mastered English did you find any particular books or book or —

NAGY: I loved the encyclopedias, I loved the atlases, I loved Newsweek and Business Week. And of course my dad got Engineering Record and Architectural Record.

Q: Well that's, you know, did your — your father obviously was, you know, an engineer. But that didn't attract you.

NAGY: Well, when I started college I thought I was going to be an architect and I actually started in architecture and switched very quickly.

Q: When you were in the District of Columbia, were schools segregated in those days?

NAGY: No. The grade school I went to, Bancroft Elementary was majority black. I had never seen black people before, so for me it was quite a shock and I got adjusted very quickly. Then I got to Gordon Junior High and that's kind of where I ran into racism, because the black kids I went to school with at Bancroft ended up — it was a track system and they ended up in like the basic or the general track, and I ended up in the honors track, and I'm convinced to this day that it was based on skin color because those kids at Bancroft were just as sharp as I was.

Q: Yep. Well, how did you find the DC school, I mean your contact with the DC school system?

NAGY: I loved it. I mean they prepared me as well as any student can be prepared. When I came to Texas Tech University to get my bachelor's I — I did really, really well in my class. The math I learned at Western High was above the levels that I was taking in college algebra.

Q: You went to Western High?

NAGY: Yeah.

Q: Yeah. Western High had very high standards, didn't it?

NAGY: Western and Wilson were the two top high schools. And I liked Western — Western was actually a multi-racial school. There were an awful lot of foreign kids there. And Wilson was pretty well lily white at the time.

Q: Did you get involved in any extra curricular activities at Western?

NAGY: Things like the chess club, and Russian club. The only athletics I really did was swimming.

Q: Did you find that there were any times when you felt sort of Hungarian or —

NAGY: Oh, lot of times because there was an active Hungarian community in Washington, a big one. We got together on a regular basis, so — and then home of course we spoke Hungarian, my dad and I. So I always maintained that, that bicultural aspect.

Q: Well, did sort of the Hungarian community — let's talk up through high school — sort of intrude on the life of when are we going to go back and that sort of thing, or —

NAGY: Oh, it was — yeah, absolutely. It was more bitter, bitter anti-communism. I mean the Hungarian community was extremely right winged. And that formed a certain basis of my own political development because I was, you know I was always a very strong Republican. I walked door-to-door for Barry Goldwater. And then I know a lot of that came from sheer anti-communism from the Hungarian community.

Q: Well, did you find sort of your friends at high school, that they were more — I would think less political than somebody coming from out of the exodus.

NAGY: They were. They were much less pol — they were much less geopolitical. But in Washington the — I'd say at that time the course of the honors study went from high school to — most of the people there had some interest in the world at large.

Q: Did you sort of concentrate on any particular area at high school as far as parts of the world and —

NAGY: I was always interested in the ancient world and that part of history, and then of course Europe, Central and Eastern Europe. I had absolutely no knowledge at all about Africa, which is really funny because I've been in Africa.

Q: Yeah. Of course you graduated from high school when?

NAGY: '66.

Q: Did you get caught up at all — you say you were sort of right wing Republican — did sort of the youth and change to the Kennedy Administration catch you at all?

NAGY: No. No, as a matter of fact I was bitterly opposed to the Robert Kennedy views of wanting to recognize China.

Q: Because you know, this was a period of — well, going from Eisenhower to Kennedy did catch a lot of the younger people particularly at that time. Did you have any idea where you — what you wanted to do, where you wanted to go when you were in high school?

NAGY: Well, I was still thinking of being an architect. The dream of being an American diplomat was always twirling around in my mind. When I was a kid I was sure about it. So I looked for a university which was going to be very cheap but had a good school of architecture in it. I knew I'd be having to finance part of my way through school so that's how I ended up at Texas Tech.

Q: Did you get — was it a scholarship?

NAGY: No, not a scholarship. I checked with the American Institute of Architects where I could find a low cost architecture program and I had saved money, because I delivered papers and stuff like that. I saved money, my dad chipped in a little bit, and I had jobs when I was little.

Q: What paper were you delivering?

NAGY: Well, I delivered the Evening Star.

Q: Did you have any contact with sort of the diplomatic types in Washington when you —

NAGY: No, never. Not at all. No. I finished my school, came here to college, and that's when my dad joined USAID. I was in my second year in college and then he went off to Vietnam.

Q: Well, you were at Texas Tech from when to when?

NAGY: I was at Texas Tech from fall of '66 until summer of '72.

Q: What was Texas Tech like in those days?

NAGY: Well, it was a very insular school, very few students from outside the state of Texas. Actually very few students from outside the area. It was for me a total culture shock never having been west of the Mississippi, but I absolutely loved the folks here, I loved the area. It was so different from Washington DC urban center. So it was just — it was a wonderful place. Especially once I changed my major from architecture to history and political science.

Q: Well, history and political science. Well, what was there about architecture you didn't care for?

NAGY: It was too much work.

Q: (laughs) Ah, yes.

NAGY: Way too much — way, way more work than I was willing to invest in those days.

Q: Well, particularly I take it you weren't that turned on by architecture.

NAGY: No. No, no, no. It was not a passion at all.

Q: You almost have to have a passion, I would think.

NAGY: oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

Q: How about extracurricular activities? Did you get involved in those?

NAGY: Absolutely. I joined a social fraternity, which was fantastic because it really let me blossom in ways — I was always like a year younger than everybody else. And finally at the university I caught up. And of course being in a social fraternity led to a very, very active social life and made lots and lots of friends, made some very close friends. Met my wife through the fraternity because, you know, fraternity had a lot of interactions with sororities.

Q: Oh yeah. What fraternity was it?

NAGY: Sigma Nu.

Q: Mm-hmm.

NAGY: And today I'm their chapter advisor, again which is full circle.

Q: Where did the student body come from?

NAGY: Mostly from small towns in West Texas, back then. Now it's totally different.

Q: With a name like Tibor Nagy this must have set you off to —

NAGY: Oh, it did. It absolutely did. You know, I was a very strange, strange person to most people. And not only because of being an immigrant, but also being a Republican. Because back then there were no Republicans in Texas.

Q: Well, did you — could you wear your Republicanness on your sleeve or not or —

NAGY: Oh, absolutely. Oh, absolutely. I always made a pride of being, you know, I didn't care what other people thought.

Q: What about Hispanic and African-American students, were there many at that time?

NAGY: No, not at all. Even though the region has always had a huge Hispanic population there were very few at university in those days and the African-American population of the school and the town was fairly negligent.

Q: Was Lyndon Johnson a presence?

NAGY: Lyndon Johnson was a fairly significant presence by the time I came here, '66. I mean that would have been on the — kind of on the way out. The biggest presence was the governor of Texas that came from Lubbock and really helped the school.

Q: Who was the governor?

NAGY: Preston Smith.

Q: Ah-ha.

NAGY: He invested very heavily in a law school and a medical school here.

Q: I was just thinking, did Texas Tech — I take it football was a craze there or?

NAGY: Huge, still is. Absolutely.

Q: Yeah, did you find yourself — were you sort of the observer or were you 110% American by this point?

NAGY: Oh, I was 110% American, but I was still 100% Hungarian. It was a, you know, I didn't notice the contradiction in really, really loving high school and college football, but at the same time loving Hungarian food and Hungarian wine and those types of things.

Q: Was there a Hungarian community there?

NAGY: No, not at all.

Q: In that area, you know, I guess — I think — maybe I'm wrong, but there was a significant German-American community.

NAGY: German, German-American and Czech. And of course Hispanic.

Q: Today is September 20, 2010. Sorry I'm a little late. I got — do you remember where we left off?

NAGY: Let's see. We had gotten to the United States, we were talking about — I think we were talking about me coming to Texas Tech and switching from architecture to, to political science and history. I believe.

Q: OK. Well, after — when were you at Texas Tech?

NAGY: I came straight to Texas Tech after I graduated from Western High School in Washington in the fall of 1966 and I was here from the fall of '66 until the summer of 1972.

Q: You were there from — to '72, this would be '68 to '72?

NAGY: '66 to '72. It took me six years to finish because I worked my way through college, so I had several semesters when I took just, you know, minimum credit hours.

Q: What type of work were you doing?

NAGY: Well — well I delivered chickens, I worked in a grocery store, I delivered flowers among — amongst other jobs. And in the summers I worked at a YMCA camp in Pennsylvania.

Q: Was your father off in the wild somewhere?

NAGY: My dad left for Vietnam I think in '68.

Q: And I can't remember if we talked about it, but what was your sort of — what was your feeling about Vietnam and what was happening at Texas Tech?

NAGY: Well, Texas Tech was an extremely conservative school at the time, and in many respects it still is. So there was absolutely no anti-Vietnam War movement here to speak

of. I think they tried to organize, you know, an anti-war demonstration and maybe 20 students showed up. So myself having been grown up as a — from the time I came to the States I was a Republican and at that time I was — I guess what you called a strong supporter of U.S. policy in Vietnam.

Q: So this was just a given almost, wasn't it?

NAGY: Oh yeah.

Q: Considering both your background and —

NAGY: Anti-communism runs in our blood.

Q: (laughs) OK, well then what type of history were you taking when you finally ended up in history?

NAGY: Well, I took — well, my — I focused on constitutional. Well, political science I focused on the constitutional issues side. On the history side I took courses all over the — all over the spectrum. You know, Latin American, African, ancient, U.S., every — diplomatic history, all of those.

Q: I mean obviously with your father in AID did sort of the Foreign Service or diplomacy in general have a particular attraction for you?

NAGY: Sure did because the first time I took the Foreign Service exam I was just finishing up college.

Q: That was —

NAGY: That was in '72. I think I took it the first time in '72 and flunked.

Q: Looking back on it, what flunked you?

NAGY: I had not taken any economics as an undergraduate. And you know part — a lot — part of the test is focused on economics. I totally flunked those questions.

Q: So you graduated in '72. What'd you do?

NAGY: Well, I took — moved to Washington with my wife, no job. She got a job very quickly because she had real skills. She had clerical skills. And I took the Civil Service exam and after a couple of months I was employed by the General Services Administration as a — as a trainee contracting officer.

Q: That sounds exciting.

NAGY: Oh, my gosh, yes. My first job was buying hand tools for the government.

Q: Oh boy.

NAGY: Can you imagine? Well, then I graduated up to power tools, but. But seriously, with General — I worked the General Services Administration from December of '72 until September of I believe — or like August of '78 and I real — during that time I finished my master's degree at night and I also gained expertise in, in the new technology of office computer systems.

Q: Oh yes.

NAGY: I mean I, I started doing that like in '73, '74 when no one had heard of word processing and, you know, mini computers and things like that. I was kind of in on that from the ground floor and I helped design some of the systems for GSA (General Services Administration) and went around the country and did training.

Q: Yeah, that could have been very exciting really.

NAGY: Yeah, that part of it — I got out of the contracting business very quickly and went over to the systems planning and the — and then kind of more the management side.

Q: Just as a side, what was the background of your wife?

NAGY: She — she was taking her degree in music at Texas Tech and left here without finishing her bachelor's and then went to night school at Georgetown University and finished her bachelor's at Georgetown.

Q: Did you take the Foreign Service exam again or?

NAGY: I finally took the Foreign Service again in 1977, and I passed.

Q: Then when did you take the oral exam?

NAGY: Probably also I suspect it was in '77, because I was offered my job in — in '78. And my security clearance would have taken quite a long time because having been born overseas in a communist country.

Q: Yeah. I can't remember, were you in the Young Pioneers or?

NAGY: Yeah, I was. And —

Q: The red kerchief and all?

NAGY: The Red Kerchief Society, the whole bit, so I'm sure that that was —

Q: (laughs) Well, do you recall on the oral exam any of the questions that —

NAGY: Yeah, actually I do. I was asked who my two favorite American presidents were during the 20th century, and I was fairly provocative because I cited Richard Nixon as one and I guess Teddy Roosevelt as the other. And also, the other interesting thing was that I did not realize that the oral exam was anything but kind of as a — I thought it was very

pro forma, so I was not at all worried. And then I was shocked to find that half the people actually did not pass the oral exam.

Q: And they told you at the time, didn't they?

NAGY: They told me afterwards. And I was — I was really shocked because I had absolutely no qualms, no nervousness whatsoever going into the oral exam, which probably helped me.

Q: It probably did, yeah, because just about that time — I stopped in '76, but I spent a year giving the oral exam.

NAGY: Oh, interesting. Yeah.

Q: Did —

NAGY: I took it in Washington.

Q: I can't remember at that time, did they sort of place you where, what sort of work you're going to be doing and —

NAGY: They put me on the register. I wanted to be an administrative officer, but they didn't — they said that, you know, I had to — they didn't do that conditional offer of employment like they do now. They just had — and you had to get your medical done and, and your security clearance and then we'll place you on a register, and then we'll call you if we need you kind of thing.

Q: So how long did it take before they called you?

NAGY: It took probably about a year. I know my security clearance took a long, long time.

Q: Yeah. How old were you when you left Hungary?

NAGY: I was seven-years-old when I left Hungary.

Q: Oh yeah, well obviously you had plenty of time to solve all the principles of, of communist Serbia by then.

NAGY: Absolutely.

Q: (laughs) Well, you came in '79, was it?

NAGY: I came in August of '78.

Q: '78. Your A100 course, what was its consistency? Women and minorities?

NAGY: The interesting thing was the average age was 29, which was about what I was then. And we had — we definitely had — I think we had like, almost 30 people in the class. And I would say a good dozen were women, just a couple of, of folks of color, and I remember we had I think one Hispanic guy and one Asian. And at that time they had midlevel entrance, and I think the Hispanic guy and the Asian were midlevel entrance because I — I thought — we all thought of the Asian guy as like the father of the class, and he must have been like 40-year-old or something.

Q: Oh yeah. Well, what did you get out of the A100 course?

NAGY: Well, I had a — I had a really great instructor because later he then ended up being the charg# d'affaires in the Seychelles, where I worked for him. It was Steve Dawkins was the course coordinator and what I got out of there was we really got a sense of what Foreign Service life was going to be like.

Q: Did you have any feel for where you wanted to go or what you wanted to do?

NAGY: Well, I had thought that I would end up in Eastern Europe, and then I realized quickly that there was no way. So we were attending a Methodist church at the time and

my wife taught Sunday school and among the Sunday school kids she had the children of the Zambian ambassador. And we had of course never heard of Zambia before. And when the list came out for us to, you know, to go to, low and behold they were mostly African countries. So you know, I, I started at that time thinking well, you know, maybe Africa's the way to go and I was recruited out of that class — I was given a job that was not on the list because the DG at the time, Barnes, and his deputy, Gershinson, they were desperately wanting to computerize the State Department. So they knew that I'd had computer experience before so they wanted me to take a job in the State Department basically doing what I had been doing across the river at the General Services Administration, except for $8,000 less in pay. So basically I told them, you know, I said, “Listen guys, if that's what you want me to do I'm going to go back to my old job at GSA because I was being offered a promotion there and I could get more money. I joined the State Department for the Foreign Service, not to do computers again in the basement.”

So they basically, you know, they, they said well, junior officer doing this and so basically they came back to the deal. They said, “Well, you do this project for six months and after that we'll send you to the best post available.” I thought ha ha ha. So I did the computer bit for six months and then after that they said we have a vacancy in Lusaka, Zambia.

I said, “Great.” GSO (general service officer) Lusaka sounded wonderful because we knew the Zambian ambassador.

Q: OK, so you went to Zambia.

NAGY: Yeah.

Q: You were there from when to when?

NAGY: I was there from '79 to '81.

Q OK, could you talk a little bit about Zambia, 1980 — '79?

NAGY: Zambia was an extremely tough post. It was the front line in the liberation struggle going on next door in Rhodesia. There were Rhodesian or Zimbabwean, whatever you want to call them, rebels, guerillas, freedom fighters — again, you know, pick your term — coming out of Zambia and Lusaka. And we were frequently visited by the Rhodesian security forces who came in on, you know, swoop attacks. There was a very strong anti-American feeling in Lusaka. There was a very strong anti-white feeling in Lusaka. Crime was off the charts. I was the general service officer and the assistant security officer. I — I actually slept with a submachine gun under my bed because house break-ins were so frequent. Bought the biggest dog we could buy and we ended up having our triplets while we were in Zambia.

Q: Had your what?

NAGY: Our triplets.

Q: Oh your — good God.

NAGY: Yeah.

Q: If you're going to do it you might as well go whole hog.

NAGY: Well, they were born next door in Zimbabwe right after the transition, because that was the closest — closest adequate hospital we could find because my wife was having a terrible case of toxemia. Her blood pressure was through the roof. We had to charter a plane to get her out of Zambia and into — into Rhodesia. It was a miracle that the kids were, were born and that they stayed alive, given the circumstances.

Q: Well, then let's talk a bit about who, who was the head of Zambia at the time?

NAGY: Kenneth Kaunda was the President of Zambia, and Frank Wisner was ambassador, and Wes Egan was DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission).

Q: Well, you had one of our top ambassadors.

NAGY: Well, that was his first time to be ambassador I think, and it was Wes' first time to be DCM so we were all kind of there doing it — I think all of us were in our jobs for the first time.

Q: Well, was there a political situation in Zambia, or was it — Kaunda was just the number one and that was it?

NAGY: Kaunda was number one. The economy was going to hell in a hand basket. Political situation was extremely dicey because Kaunda had become very unpopular. The miners were against him and the guy who eventually succeeded Kaunda - Chiluba, was the head of the Miner's Union at the time. So there was, you know, like I said, crime was off the scales, the Zimbabwean freedom fighters were better armed than the Zambian security forces. It was just a really, really dicey situation.

Q: Well, what were the Zambian freedom fighters doing there?

NAGY: Zimbabwean? Well, because they were stationed in Zambia because they'd been chased out of Zimbabwe. So they would go in for — raids into Zimbabwe and then come back to their — to their camps in Zambia.

Q: I take it they weren't overly disciplined.

NAGY: No. No, no, no. They were totally undisciplined. And they had a huge chip on their shoulders against — against whites.

Q: Well, what were we doing there?

NAGY: Where, in Zambia?

Q: Yeah.

NAGY: Well, we were — we were actually engaged with the transition, trying to get a transition from the white minority government next door in Rhodesia and also the embassy was heavily involved in the negotiations on Namibia. That's where the UN institute was, was in Lusaka, which was training the future — the Namibian civil servants.

Q: Well, did you get involved in any of this or were you —

NAGY: I was strictly General Services Offices.

Q: Well, what was the general — what were you doing as —

NAGY: Well, I was taking care of, of residences. I was doing the leasing, I was doing the contracting, I was doing — in charge of the maintenance. I was in charge of shipping and receiving. I was in charge of the budgets. Like I said, security. It was probably the most challenging job because you could not buy anything locally, I mean nothing. Once we walked into the best stocked local supermarket and the only thing on the shelves was Korean strawberry jam — North Korean strawberry jam.

Q: Oh God. Well, where did you get your stuff?

NAGY: We got it out of South Africa, very surreptitious, you know, everyone kind of blinked. I got just about everything out in South Africa and had some shipments come out of Europe.

Q: Did you find that the State Department was giving you, as a general service officer, enough money, enough wherewithal to deal with the situation?

NAGY: Yeah, actually the State Department — Africa Bureau was extremely supportive, extremely supportive. One of the things I unfortunately had then was my very first State Department inspection. And as a total neophyte I think it was a total disaster. You know, because I was kind of inventing it as I went along. But that taught me very well that in

the future I had to prepare for inspections better and from that point on — I think I was inspected at every single post — and from that point all my inspections were terrific. But that first one was a disaster.

Q: Well, where did you — I mean just as a guide for the neophyte who ends up in a place like this, where'd you get the information on how to do what you had to do?

NAGY: (laughs) Like I said, I should have been reading the FAMs (Foreign Affairs Manuals), but I didn't have time to read them. My administrative officer, my second one, who will not — was not the best guide in the world, so I just, I just kind of did what I thought, you know, should be done. Because we all know with the State Department and government in general it's not always the best course of action.

Q: Did the government of Zambia, the people you had to deal with, were they basically hostile?

NAGY: Very hostile. Very, very hostile. Up and down the line, no matter who from our embassy, whatever they were trying to do the Zambians were not cooperative in any way whatsoever.

Q: Well, were we —

NAGY: They were either actively uncooperative or actively inefficient, or actively incompetent.

Q: Well, were there things — were we trying to raise our profile as a friend of Zambia or not, or was this ineffective?

NAGY: It was pretty ineffective. They were going to be hostile to the west immaterial. So you know, things — the simplest things, I mean — our telephone would work 20 minutes a week. The electricity would always be going off. The water was undrinkable. The roads

were totally unpaved. You couldn't buy gas — it was just — it was just an absolute, absolute mess.

Q: What about the other embassies there? How were the Brits being treated?

NAGY: The Brits were being treated even worse than we were. I think our embassy compound bordered the Brits on one side and the Germans on the other side. The Zambians regularly had demonstrations against the Brits because they blamed the Brits for having allowed the Rhodesians to declare, you know, Unilateral Declaration of Independence.

Q: Yeah, the UDI.

NAGY: Yeah.

Q: Ian Smith and all that.

NAGY: Exactly.

Q: How was that the — the situation there reflected where you were? I mean you had in Zimbabwe or Southern Rhodesia, I mean you had the troops coming over. Were there ups and downs of how —

NAGY: Well, during the two years I was there the first year was very difficult, but that was kind of the end of the Rhodesian War. Then the Rhodesians negotiated a deal with the Brits and then they went ahead and had elections and Mugabe was elected and the transition happened. So all of a sudden the border opened up and we could drive down to Salisbury, down to Harare, and buy embassy supplies and you know, come back up as — remarkable Harare — the, the Zimbab — the Rhodesian regime was well stocked, the roads were maintained, you know, they had a functioning country, as opposed to the Zambians.

Q: Well, was this what Kaunda did or had this been a legacy of colonialism?

NAGY: No, this was basically Kaunda. He ran it into the ground, along with of course the collapse in copper prices, because when Zambia became independent copper was selling at a premium and then there was a collapse in the prices — remember in the early '70s, I believe — so then their budget went into the hole and — but Kaunda's own incompetence helped.

Q: Mm-hmm. Were there any — the North Koreans or Chinese or mucking around there?

NAGY: The East Germans were there in a big way to help with security. The Soviets of course were there. The Chinese were there. This was during a period of time when the Soviets and the Chinese were not getting along and the Chinese were the ones who supported Mugabe in Zimbabwe, whereas the Soviets were supporting Joshua Nkomo. So it took the Soviets a long time to open an embassy when all the embassies opened in Zimbabwe. But all of these guys were very heavily present in Lusaka, Zambia.

Q: Well, did you find that particularly the East Germans and Soviets were viewing you — I mean people with concern, particularly with your Hungarian name and all or?

NAGY: No, I didn't have contact with them. But we did have for the first time contact with the Chinese, because that was when China opened up and the Chinese embassy invited us to a delightful dinner. It was like embassy to embassy. And then they organized a ping-pong tournament between them, us, and the Japanese and they wiped us clean. Then we organized the basketball tournament with them and we wiped them clean.

Q: (laughs).

NAGY: It was kind of mutual respect. And the Chinese found me fascinating because of my background, and I know they were convinced I was an intel officer.

Q: Oh yes (laughs), when in doubt. I found myself one time listed in the East German publication called Who's Who in the CIA?

NAGY: Oh yeah, it's amazing.

Q: I had worked at INR (Bureau of Intelligence and Research) at one point.

NAGY: Oh, well that did it.

Q: And that put me right in it.

NAGY: That did it.

Q: Did you get any sense of being an African hand? I mean did this sort of wet your whistle or, you know, get you sort of interested in Africa, or not?

NAGY: I was interested in Africa even before I went out there, and this tour just absolutely — even though it was a really, really, really tough place. We just further fell in love with Africa and, you know, from that point on all of my — all of my postings were in Africa. I always looked for African postings.

Q: Well, how did your wife think about this? I would think twins —

NAGY: Triplets.

Q: — would have —

NAGY: Triplets.

Q: I mean triplets, my God, yes. I can't even conceive of triplets, but.

NAGY: Well, she was, you know, I mean she was very heavily — heavy duty focused on raising the kids. And until the kids were born she was doing all sorts of part time

employment. She worked in the consular section and worked in the admin officer's section. But after that, you know, her — her ability to work for pay really declined, although she did have some jobs later on like in Ethiopia.

Q: Well, I would have thought. I mean the mere thought of living in Africa. But where did you go when you left Zama —

NAGY: I left Zambia in 1981 and did a direct transfer to the Seychelles.

Q: Well —

NAGY: The Seychelles Islands where the charg# was my previous A100 course leader.

Q: Well, before leaving Zambia, how long did Kaunda last?

NAGY: After I left?

Q: Yeah.

NAGY: Oh, I think he lasted probably until about '89 or '90.

Q: So I take it, I mean just things kept going downhill.

NAGY: Oh yeah, things just kept going downhill. Well, then copper prices I think recovered somewhat. They got a little bit better. But I know that things initially for a number of years just kept getting worse and worse and worse.

Q: Well, what was our reading on Kaunda? Was it his incompetence? Corruption? Deliberate — was it deliberate? I mean what was —

NAGY: That he was a well-intentioned guy who was just hopelessly incompetent.

Q: He was a doctor, wasn't he?

NAGY: Yes, he was an academician.

Q: Uh-huh.

NAGY: No, absolutely. And he was a well-meaning guy, but you know he had an entourage totally corrupt and their whole idea was just to keep him in power.

Q: Did you ever meet him?

NAGY: I went — I represented the embassy at one particular event and I got to see him there. But you know, that was the only time. Like I — my focus in Zambia was totally on the administrative management side. I didn't get involved at all on the substantive side.

Q: Well, I assume that the management — the GSO particularly having a rather non — not terribly competent administrative officer, you must have gotten a background on, on doing that work that —

NAGY: I did.

Q: — put you in good stead for the rest of your career.

NAGY: It did, absolutely. Absolutely. And I — and I — that's why I always believed that everybody should be a GSO once.

Q: Well, then when — the Seychelles. The Seychelles I only think of as — ones up here think the commandos kept trying to take over the place.

NAGY: That's when I was there. I was there for that.

Q: Well, in the first place explain what the Seychelles are.

NAGY: The Seychelles are a group of islands, 130 or some islands stretching several thousand miles in the middle of the Indian Ocean. The main island where they have

the capital is called Mah#. It's about seven miles wide and 17 miles long, but it's very mountainous. So if you flattened it out it would be about as big as West Virginia. It rises very quickly from, from the seashore. They're granitic islands. There are not very many granitic islands in the world. Absolutely spectacular beaches. About 60,000 residents and about twice that many visitors. For a long time their visitors were exclusively high price and then they opened an airport. And as a matter fact, it's one of the largest runways in the world because the airport there serves as a backup for the space shuttle. We had a U.S. government tracking station in the Seychelles, keep track of Soviet satellites. Our embassy had a staff of about six. That was one of our smaller embassies, whereas the Soviet embassies had about 60. They were I think all together seven diplomatic missions on the Seychelles. I think of the Brits because it had been both a British and a French colony with somewhat of a mixed past because during the same period of time both Britain and France thought they were its colony. There was also a Soviet mission, a Chinese mission, a French mission, an Indian mission, a Libyan mission, and us.

Q: Well, 60 Soviets. What the hell were they doing?

NAGY: I think keeping track of each other. It was very — it was pitiful. They all traveled everywhere together on buses. They would all go to the beach together. But the interesting arrangement was we had a cultural center. We had a chess club. The Soviet ambassador came to our chess club meeting that we hosted, as did the KGB (Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnostir (State Committee for State Security)) resident officer. He came to the chess club meeting. I served there as the second ranking officer, even though my title was administrative officer. There was no DCM. The ambassador was Bill Harrop in Nairobi. We had a resident charg#, Steve Dawkins. It was him, myself, another officer, the charg#'s secretary and two communicators. And that was it. During my tour there it switched over from being a charg# to having a resident ambassador. Dave Fisher came out as a resident ambassador, and they kept me as the second ranking officer. So it was really neat

because it was my second tour in the Foreign Service, I got to spend about 25% of my time as charg#.

Q: Oh! Well, what was the government, the politics of the Seychelles?

NAGY: It was a quote unquote, “Marxist dictatorship,” that was totally entrepreneurial and capitalistic in everything except names. Ideologically Marxist, but otherwise free enterprise reigned. They were the same old pirates of history, just you know, wearing different hats. They were Marxist for the Soviets and, and they would look at us and talk about yes, but there are eight international banks that have branches in the Seychelles. Mostly to launder money, but you know, they were still there, so.

Q: Well, were there any political movements on the island?

NAGY: No, because President Ren#, who is still there, but now he's a capitalist and a free enterprise guy, he took over in a coup when the former president of the island left the country for a commonwealth meeting. During my time there was an attack by South African mercenaries, as well as an army mutiny. So it was very dicey and as a matter of fact I was almost shot to death by Tanzanian soldiers who thought that I was a South African mercenary during the mercenary invasion.

Q: Well, let's talk about the mercenary invasion. What was this all about?

NAGY: Well, the former president, who had been overthrown, organized a group of mercenaries under Bob Denard —

Q: Who is very famous as being Mr. Professional —

NAGY: Mercenary.

Q: — Mercenary.

NAGY: He had a group come to the Seychelles Islands around Christmastime under the name “ancient order of froth blowers” and it was this made up organization that was coming to, quote unquote, “give toys to an orphanage.”

Q: Good God.

NAGY: And in fact they all had false bottoms on their suitcases with automatic weapons there and when they arrived at the airport there was a group of — I want to remember — maybe 14 of them. Thirteen of them came to the green customs line and got in and one of the idiots came through the red line whereas a Seychelles customs officer started looking in his suitcase, found the false bottom, and first thought that it was an underwater spear gun, started filling in the form to allow him to import an underwater spear gun when the customs supervisor walked by, realized it was a weapon and raised the alarm, at which time the mercenaries assembled their weapons, took over the airport, and attacked the Seychelles military base next to the airport and almost succeeded in overcoming several 100 Seychelles soldiers. I think it was one Seychelles lieutenant who had the wherewithal to get into an armored vehicle and fight back, which caused the mercenaries to give up and hijack an Indian plane, which had just arrived, and fly it to South Africa. The mercenaries I think lost — two killed. They got to South Africa and they left behind a couple of colleagues who'd been on the island to prepare the way for them. Their plan had been to, to burst into the Council of Governments, this was meet — going to be meeting the next day and basically wipe out the Seychelles Government. They made it back to South Africa and of course the island went into full lockdown, full curfew. And it was at that point that I was mistaken for a mercenary and held at gunpoint by the Tanzanians who stuck a machine gun to the back of my head and made me drive my car to the army base. Along with me was our State Department communicator who also looked like — he was a tall white guy with a beard. Luckily I knew the minister of defense of the island and he saw us and started laughing and said, “Let these guys go because they're American diplomats.”

Q: Good God.

NAGY: Yeah.

Q: Well, how — there wasn't time, I take it, for any reaction from the other embassies or anything like that? I mean you were all —

NAGY: Oh, for that? No, not at all. I mean it was just one of those things that happened.

Q: What about — you say there was another army takeover or try — attempt?

NAGY: Yeah, that was about a year later when part of the army mutinied and tried to overthrow the government, but the rest of the army stayed loyal and you had one army base kind of bombing another army base. I'm going to have to leave, but I want to tell you an interesting story next time we speak about our neighbor, the French consul who had an unfortunate event happen the night of the mercenary attack.

Q: Today is September 27, 2010. Do you remember where we left off?

NAGY: Was it in the Seychelles?

Q: Yeah, I think we'd just sort of gotten to the Seychelles.

NAGY: Yeah, I think I said that — you were asking me about the attempt against the government by Mike Hoar and his mercenaries and then we talked about the army mutiny about a year later.

Q: Well, let's talk about the Seychelles, per se. What were they? I mean, you know, from the American perspective, outside of a place where the beautiful people of Europe go to take their clothes off, what is there?

NAGY: Well, the thing for us that we were very interested at the time of attracting Soviet satellites from Earth. We didn't have satellites in space yet to track Soviets. And we had a tracking station in Sunnyvale, California, and if you stuck a pin — assuming that the earth is an orange, if you stuck a pin into Sunnyvale the other end of it would come out right on the Seychelles Islands. So we had a tracking station in the Seychelles. It was run by the Air Force, but there were only a handful of Air Force officers there. They were mostly contractors who worked for Pan Am or somebody else. And that I think is the reason the Soviets had such a large embassy presence in the Seychelles, because they were keenly interested in what we were doing. And they also had a number of Soviet ships calling at the port. And also at the time our — we had planes flying out of Diego Garcia overflying the Seychelles continuously. So the Soviets were very interested about us, and we were there basic — I think our mission there was to be there to support the tracking station and also to keep track of what the Soviets were doing.

Q: Well, had the Indian Ocean become sort of a place where the missile subs sort of prowled on both sides or?

NAGY: Yeah, and the big powers kind of rubbed up against each other because the Seychelles occupied an awful lot of territory given the number of islands in the territory, and waters. I think it was like 300,000 square miles of ocean. So the islands were like stationary aircraft carriers.

Q: Well, was there anything other than sort of an airfield, a civilian airfield there or?

NAGY: No, not really. There was a nice harbor and there was a huge airport, which we helped build as a backup landing site for these space shuttles.

Q: So you were there from when to when?

NAGY: I was in the Seychelles from '81 to '83 and we had — first we had a permanent charg#, Steve Dawkins, because the ambassador, Bill Harrop, was resident in Kenya.

When that charg# left a resident ambassador, Dave Fisher, was assigned. And after Dave I think we had several more ambassadors before the post was closed.

Q: Well, what sort of an embassy did you have there?

NAGY: We just have — we just had a very small embassy. We had the head of mission, whether it was the charg# or the ambassador. I was the second ranking officer. We had an ambassador's secretary. We had two communicators. And then we had another officer. It was a very small embassy.

Q: Well, were you rubbing noses with the Soviets at that time?

NAGY: Yes, very much so. I think last time I mentioned that we had, out of our cultural center we had a chess club, a Seychelles Chess Club that played every Monday night. And the Russian — the Soviet ambassador showed up regularly with the KGB station chief.

Q: I mean were you approached or others approached about defecting or anything like that or?

NAGY: No, but we just — we kept track of each other. They were worried about us and we were concerned about them, especially them trying to get into the tracking station.

Q: Other — you say the Chinese —

NAGY: I think we had the Soviets, we had the Chinese, we had the British, we had the French, we had the Indians and the Libyans and —

Q: How about the Libyans? Were they mucking around or?

NAGY: No. No, not at all. They were — I think if that was during the period of time when Colonel Gadaffi was trying to have Libyan “people's bureaus” strewn in every single country in Africa because, you know, he was making an effort to be an African leader.

Q: Yeah.

NAGY: — And the Seychelles was a member of the Africa Union, or at that time the Organization of African States. They were kind of just there.

Q: Yeah. Well, what'd you all do?

NAGY: Well, we had a good time. I, in addition to serving as second ranking officer, I was the administrative officer, I was the political officer, I was the economic officer, and I was the public affairs officer, and the security officer. So we were — I did most of the reporting and representation and I did the public diplomacy. It was a lot of fun. I maintain that our little embassy was more productive than my big embassy in Nigeria.

Q: OK, well there you are, but what's there to report on, for example?

NAGY: Well, we — back then we still had the CRP reports, you know, the relations with Communist countries, the various demarches, etc. The Seychelles had the same vote in the United Nations as, as India. So you know, we did — we engaged with them, tried to get American businesses to come invest, we had our share of congressional visitors, we had our consular issues with American tourists who got into trouble.

Q: Well, how about the Indians? Did they have anything there?

NAGY: Yeah, they did. They did a couple of ship visits. And you know the Indians at that — I mean the Indians were interested in things going on in the Indian Ocean and also we had — one of the things I did is we had a lot of nonresident diplomats come through and ask for things and figure out what was going on. And I had invariably German visitors and

Australians came a lot, they were quite interested. South Africans I think came by in the guise of South African business representatives who were strangely interested in, you know, geopolitical intelligence there.

Q: Was this at the time when there was a feeling that the South African Israelis had conducted nuclear tests or not or?

NAGY: That happened I was still in Zambia, because I remember visiting South Africa when all that happened. So no, but the Seychelles were extremely — I mean their foreign policy was extremely Marxist on the political side and extremely capitalist on the economic side.

Q: Did you have much contact with the government?

NAGY: Oh yeah, absolutely. I could get in to see anybody at any time. It was all very relaxed. I could see ministers, I could see the foreign minister— even when I was serving as charg# and I needed to carry on some business I could see the defense minister, the deputy prime minister at just about any time.

Q: Well, did they have — how did — how were they oriented regarding — imagine UN (United Nations) votes became important for you.

NAGY: Yeah, on their UN voting they pretty well towed the Soviet line down the — you know, down the line.

Q: Did you feel that the Soviets had a real hold there or was this just —

NAGY: No, they, they did because they helped them on the security side and that's what they were interested in. They knew that they would get the Western tourists and they'd get the Western bankers. But, but on the political side they had the Soviets for security. Right

after the mutiny within two days there was a Soviet cruiser which showed up in the port, so they counted on the Soviets.

Q: Well, in a way were you — you and we not too unhappy that the Soviets were at least keeping this government stable?

NAGY: Well, it — at that time our — we were ambivalent in that regard. We were not happy with the Marxist government, although we would not have minded if a previous Western oriented government had come back. We weren't there to do anything at all except make sure that our tracking station had rights, you know, to maintain itself. So that was basically our policy. We had a small Peace Corps program. We had a small USAID program. Like I said, our embassy did the public diplomacy. It was a lot of fun. it was actually one of my favorite posts.

Q: Well, what about the Peace Corps? What were they up to?

NAGY: Well, they had about a dozen volunteers doing really fun stuff. They were what I call highly professional core volunteers. They were not the kids with the bachelor's degree, you know, who were contemplating their, their navel. They were actually premed students who were helping with dentistry or people with civil engineering degrees who worked on rural roads, and things like that.

Q: They had no particular problem.

NAGY: No. Oh no, no, no. As a matter — I mean they show up, these people are phenomenal. They're very friendly, they're very laid back, they're open to everybody. So on a people to people basis we had phenomenal relations. It was only this quirky, quirky Marxist government that gave us difficulties.

Q: Well, was there any element within that Marxist government that was trying to install East German type secur — you know, police and all that or?

NAGY: No. Not at all. Not at all. No, the Seychelles law wouldn't have passed that. They're probably most laid back people on earth.

Q: Well, it sounds sort of — the whole thing sounds — might have been Marxist, but it's pretty benign.

NAGY: Oh, absolutely. It was extremely benign. Very, very benign. The joke was that 12 men with baseball bats could overthrow the government.

Q: There was no sort of spy versus spy operation going on there or?

NAGY: Well, there was to a certain extent, but it was all kind of fine.

Q: Well, after being there did you have a feeling that people were beginning to breathe down your neck about — other Foreign Service types who wanted to get out and suffer the hardships of the Seychelles?

NAGY: No, it was a — it was an undiscovered paradise. Very few people in our service knew about it. The Africa Bureau was fairly was fairly close hold on parceling out the few positions here. My ambassador was career foreign service, but I think — well, he was followed by another career person and then after that I think they went through a couple of political appointees and they closed it down once our satellites ended the need for a tracking station and the Soviet Union collapsed.

Q: Well, you left there when?

NAGY: Left there in 1983 and went back to the Africa Bureau to serve as their very first systems administrator and as a post management officer, and I did that for about a — less — I did that for less than a year, kind of almost a year. From there I went straight to Ethiopia, the first time.

Q: OK, well let's talk about the systems management. What did you mean by that?

NAGY: Well, the department was kind of stumbling into — into the automated era. And Wang was the State Department contractor. I'd had extensive experience pre-State Department with systems. And the Africa Bureau was looking for a systems manager to get — to get its first Wang systems up and running and also to get some Wangs out to the field. So I help — I helped with that, in addition to being a post management officer for about a third of Africa. And that again was a lot of fun, teaching people how to use Wangs and what word processing was and how you can classify, you know, cables on a word processor.

Q: Well, you might explain — other people have, but I'd like your explanation — of what a Wang was and why we were wedded to that particular system.

NAGY: I have no idea why we were wedded to it. It was a totally ludicrous, you know, prospect because what we did, we decided for whatever reason with our wonderful procurement process that invested totally in having the company called Wang at the time set up State Department automated systems. And it was a horrible decision because it was closed and proprietary software programs instead of using, you know, open architecture, which would have used whatever the best programs were which were available. We were stuck with Wang for a number of years, both hardware and software.

Q: Well, at this point — I know at one point Wang was basically a word processor, a fancy typewriter. But by this time it did have some computer — I mean —

NAGY: They were micro computers in effect, and they ran a number of applications, but all the applications were, were Wang applications and as a result, you know, when Wang went bankrupt the State Department was really left holding the bag and had to pay considerably to convert to an open architecture.

Q: But this wasn't in the offing when you were there in the African Bureau.

NAGY: No, when I was there I mean we were — we had just gone with the Wang contract and we were in the process of sending Wang computers all over Africa and putting them into the bureau as well.

Q: As I recall, and this is back in the late '70s when I was consular general in Seoul and we were used as one of the trial posts and they were bringing Wang in. And the big thing was that Wang said we can service you overseas when the others — other ones weren't as interested, the IBM type.

NAGY: That's right, yeah. Wang had a — I mean Wang was — for a while they were a leader in technology. You know with all these technology companies people eventually leap frog over them. I mean look — you know, even today look at the content between the chipmakers and Microsoft and Apple. So the department eventually got smart and went with off the shelf products.

Q: Well, was the African Bureau able to use what they had with this Wang at the time?

NAGY: Oh yeah. The African Bureau, I mean Africa Bureau consistently in my career was on the cutting edge of, of supporting their people. You know, we had kind of the most difficult continent for life, difficult post to live in day-to-day. So the bureau had to be on the cutting edge of supporting their people. What I'm proudest of more than anything else during my time in AF/EX was I was the force behind allowing people to get an additional consumable shipment if they extend at post, because I thought that that was patently absurd and the bureau managers were very strong supporters and I kind of did the, you know, walked through the trenches and carried that battle forward. And by the time I left the regulations had changed and enabled people to do that.

Q: Well, could you explain what that meant?

NAGY: Well, when you go to a hardship post where there are not adequate products, employees are authorized to ship in consumables. But you know, it's to the government's advantage to try to get people to stay longer. Most tours in hardship places are two years. Now if you get somebody to extend for another year, another two years then the government doesn't have to move them at that point. But the way the regulations were, if they extended another year, another two years they were not authorized for another shipment of consumables. So we thought that if you allow people to get another shipment of consumables that would be an incentive, thus saving the government considerable money, and allowing the, you know, expertise in productivity and on and on and on. I was very, very pleased that I was able to contribute to that.

Q: All right. Did you feel you were marking time? Did you have anything in mind while you were doing this?

NAGY: No, it was — I was enjoying working on the automated system and being a post-management officer and learned a lot about, you know, various post problems and profiles of various posts in Africa. But having triplets in the Washington area was a financial hardship, so I got out of there as quick as I could and when the admin slot in Addis became open, I volunteered and the bureau sent me out there in 1984.

Q: And you were there from '84 to when?

NAGY: '86.

Q: OK, what was the situation in Ethiopia in '84?

NAGY: We had the worst relations of any country with Marxist Ethiopia. At the time of the dictator, Mengistu Haile Mariam, the embassy was literally under siege in that the Ethiopian Government very strictly constricted the number of American employees that we might have there. It was an extremely Spartan environment, extremely hostile. We could not leave the capital city without permission, which we rarely ever got. David Korn was

permanent charg#. Joseph O'Neil was acting DCM. Morale was very, very difficult. It was — it was — it was extremely difficult to get anything done. There was a rebel movement in the countryside in the north that was actively fighting the Marxist army. And during my time there — very quickly during my time there it became evident that there was a very severe famine going on in the land. So all of a sudden this very small embassy — I think we only had like, 12 embassy officers, something ridiculous — from having had a huge embassy staff earlier during the time of the emperor, all of a sudden we had to respond massively to this famine. And we went in and asked the Ethiopians that we had to expand staff, so I was — in the administrative offices we were working on furiously to bring in people from the USAID, to bring in the AID supplies all within an extremely hostile working environment. I arrived there literally a couple weeks after our entire — how can I discuss intelligence? I really can't.

Q: OK.

NAGY: There were a number of American officers who were expelled, kicked out of the country prior to my arrival. Also General Vernon Walters came into the country to retrieve an American diplomat who was being held against his will under conditions of imprisonment by the Ethiopian Government. That's how —

Q: Oh boy. Well, weren't you apprehensive about arriving with wife and triplets?

NAGY: No, not really because I mean I knew the historical Ethiopia and the historical relationship, and it proved to be right. Our personal relations with the Ethiopian people were phenomenal. Our official relations were horrendous. My Soviet colleagues, on the other hand, had wonderful official relations and they had horrendous personal relations. We — an American could go into a state store, which was set up for diplomats, and they were told that nothing was available until people found out that we were Americans, at which time all the goods would come out from under the — under the counter.

Q: Oh my God.

NAGY: So I always said that I would much rather have it in that direction than in the other direction.

Q: Yeah.

NAGY: I'd rather be an American there than a Soviet. The working environment was extremely frenetic, extremely — I burned the candles at both ends, I'll put it that way.

Q: Well —

NAGY: We did things like fly in — fly in, mind you, a prefabricated construction house — constructed houses, put them up on the compound because we had USAID officers that were literally sleeping in their cars. There was no housing available. The embassy went I think from 12 people, when I arrived there, to something like 30, you know, within a two-year period as we geared up to help the famine really.

Q: Well, what was going on in Ethiopia at the time with Mengistu and all?

NAGY: Well, they were scrambling to help with the famine at the same time. There was a growing insurgency in the countryside at same time that was making more and more progress against a much better armed Ethiopian Army.

Q: Well, was this a Tigrayan, Eritrean —

NAGY: Yep, it was Tigrayan, Eritrean, the Oromo, they all had their rebel groups. But the Tigrayans and the Eritreans were making very, very quick and dramatic progress and also at that — remember, this was also the time that we worked together surreptitiously with the Sudanese and I think paid off the Ethiopians to get the Ethiopian Jews out of the country.

Q: Oh, the Falashi.

NAGY: Yeah, the Falashas. Yeah. So there was a lot going on.

Q: Well, did you get involved in the Jewish Ethiopian exodus?

NAGY: What I got involved in, I was — I was doing all the logistics for everything. I mean during my two years there we had, if I remember the count, like 150 members of Congress visit for the famine issue and also for the Jewish issue. We had planes full of congressional people that we had to deal with. So in addition to trying to get our work done, which was tremendous and demanding, we also had to deal with congressional delegation. And we had — I remember we had a Somali airliner hijacked with U.S. Military personnel on board that was there for several weeks at the same time that we had a congressional delegation. I mean the work was unbelievable.

Q: Where did you put the congressional people? I mean were there hotels?

NAGY: There — oh yeah, there was a Hilton Hotel. Yeah, there was a Hilton Hotel and we had excellent relations with the management. And there were times though when there were no hotel rooms and we would put some people up sometimes in the charg#'s residences or in other residences. I was also the chair of the school board, of the international school so we had a large international school with about 400 students, and that took a lot of work. I've never worked that hard in my life.

Q: Well, I'm just wondering, I mean this sounds like an impossible regime to deal with —

NAGY: It was.

Q: Yet — except that a hell of a lot of very positive things were going on.

NAGY: Well, the morale was phenomenal. I mean it was just morale — phenomenal because everybody was pulling together, everyone felt like they were contributing to the greater good, and we got along well. Everybody did.

Q: Well, was there concern about a collapse of the central government?

NAGY: Not then yet. That came several years later, about four or five years later I think during Bob Houdek's time.

Q: But at the time this was just something on the horizon.

NAGY: Absolutely, it was very much on the horizon.

Q: Did you get out? I mean was it possible to get out and see things?

NAGY: They gave permission to visit some of the feeding centers. We had a campsite at Lake Langano, which was within the permissible area to visit so we — the embassy staff could occasionally go down there just to relax. Aside from that, like I said we were constrained to the province of the capital and beyond that — if we had a congressional delegation coming the government begrudgingly would give permission to fly them up to Asmara or Mek'ele or one of the big feeding camps because the government knew that we were the ones supplying the food.

Q: When you say feeding camps, what were these?

NAGY: Well, these were where thousands and thousands of Ethiopians from the countryside would gather and that's where the international NGOs would try to find them and deal with them.

Q: How were relations with the NGOs?

NAGY: They were very good; they were extremely good. I mean we all depended on each other so — so yeah, we made due. I mean they were working their hearts out just as much as we were.

Q: Was there still the Swedish hospital?

NAGY: For — for what?

Q: Well, there used to be a rather sizeable — I'm told, people I've talked to talk about a Swedish hospital. But that I guess was —

NAGY: There were NGO hospitals all over the place. There was — I mean there was — yeah, the NGOs were there delivering services the government was not. There were literally thousands of Ethiopian soldiers with lost limbs. I mean the situation was just absolutely incredible, that you had this hardcore Marxist government try to run a centralized state while everything was collapsing around it.

Q: What about relations with Somalia?

NAGY: Well, it was just before I got there I think that we and the Soviets did a flip, because the Soviets in the mid '70s to late '70s, the Soviets were supporting Somalia, we were supporting Ethiopia. The Somalis invaded the Ethiopians and the Soviets very quickly realized that they were backing the wrong people, so they switched to the Ethiopians. And then we got Somalia, you know, kind of like goodbye, just because they were the ones leftover. So no, there's always hard feelings with the Ethiopians.

Q: Well, were there any elements of the government that you could deal with?

NAGY: The Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, because we were the main suppliers of food.

Q: Well, had Mengistu by this time — I mean I understand he at one point went into a Cabinet meeting and shot all the people.

NAGY: Oh yeah, that was during the Red Terror when he was taking over. During — that was in the — like I said, I got there '84. That was in the years leading up, like late '70s, early '80s, something like that. When I was there in '84 the regime was celebrating it's 10

years in power, and that was one of the things that they spent millions of millions of dollars on a celebration while people were starving to death in the countryside.

Q: Well, was there sort of a — a colonel's mafia or something? You know, a ruling class or?

NAGY: Well, there was the Derg.

Q: The Derg, yeah.

NAGY: Yeah, the Derg. And it was the young officers who had gone Marxist. And the funny thing was of course that the rebel groups fighting were also Marxists in orientation. So you had this anomaly of a Marxist dictatorship being, you know, fought tooth and nail by Marxist rebel groups.

Q: What was sort of our relations — I mean your relations and looking at Asmara? At one time we had Kagnew Station, which I take it had been shut down.

NAGY: Oh yeah, that had been shut down I think —

Q: But you know, at one point our whole relations on the horn of Africa revolved around Kagnew Station.

NAGY: That's right.

Q: And you know, how we dealt with Somalia, how we dealt with Ethiopia, because of its strategic importance. But now did we have any particular interest in — in Eritrea?

NAGY: No, because at that point it was just part of Ethiopia, and that was the center of the, of the insurgency along with Tigray. And our relations with the insurgents was done through our — I believe our Embassy in Khartoum because the rebels maintained

their liaison offices there; relations between the Mengistu Ethiopian Government and the Sudanese were awful. The Sudanese were supporting these insurgencies.

Q: Well, the Falasha — I mean there was this peculiar thing of they were being flown out of Ethiopia into the Sudan and then flown to Israel.

NAGY: Yeah, that's right. It was all — it was all very surreptitious, very hush-hush.

Q: And a lot of money was being passed.

NAGY: A lot of money, that's right. And a lot of money ended up with the Ethiopian Marxist Government too. You know, who paid who how I was not privied too. It's written about.

Q: But — but it was a well known — I mean you knew that this was going on.

NAGY: Yeah, yeah, that that — but the big operations I think came after I left. The big operations came just in the months and year prior to the government's collapse. Because at the end of the day Mengistu got on a plane and instead of flying off to visit the front line as he said he was doing, he flew off to Zimbabwe to seek political exile because he knew that his days were up. So that I think was much later in the '80s.

Q: Did the Coptic Church have any particular role as far as we were concerned at this time?

NAGY: No, the Coptic Church at that time I think Mengistu — the patriarch of the Coptic Church in Ethiopia was a Mengistu appointee and the government had basically taken all the land away from the church. And so all the churches were under siege. The church we attended, the International Evangelical Church, that was about the only evangelical church that Ethiopians could go to. The Ethiopian Government was brutal on Evangelicals. I suspect they also were brutal on ethnic groups. So it was — it was — it was a tough time for — it was a tough time for everybody.

Q: Well, so did you sort of have a responsibility for keeping up the morale, or did everybody have to do that?

NAGY: Well, I — I mean that, that fell to me because if people didn't get their shipments and the residences were not taken care of morale would suffer. And I did all kinds of stuff. I remember I had very good working relationships with the support organizations in Washington. We had a shack on the compound which one night fell down, and I called — and I needed housing desperately. And I called the Foreign Building Office, FBO, and I said, “Listen, I've got a deal for you guys. I know that we can't build a house, but how — but there is a regulation which says that I — I — I can build something to restore it to its original condition, so how about if I restore the shack to be able to house a family of, you know, with three bedrooms.” They said they had the money to move the next day and basically I locally built a house. I mean I had to be extremely ingenious, but we got things done.

Q: How were the Ethiopian employees, the Foreign Service nationals?

NAGY: Best - best local employees in the world. And they were under tremendous pressure. They were picked up, they were arrested, they were tortured, they were kept in prison. I mean I, I figured half the people were reporting on us on a regular basis because they had to, and the other half were being picked up and beaten up because they weren't. So it was very tough for them. It was a pleasure for me of course later to go back as ambassador and reward their, you know, some of the employees who were there when I was there in the mid '80s were still there when I went back in the late '90s, and I did what I could to help them get their special immigrant visas.

Q: Well again, delightful people. I ran across the Ethiopian connection in a peculiar way. I was chief of the consular section in Belgrade from '62 to '67 and at one point there was almost a complete exodus of Ethiopian students who'd gone to Bulgaria, of all places and one of the — they just decided they were being treated abysmally by the Bulgarians who

were trying to emulate the Soviets, but Bulgarians just weren't up to it and the Ethiopians were called black monkeys by the Bulgarians. And so we got this exodus and we were — the Yugoslavs said, you know, you take care of the problem. So we were getting them into American schools and all this. But I was very impressed by the people who were coming out.

NAGY: Phenomenal people. Well, as I tell my Africa class, Ethiopia was the only country in Africa that is a result of history and geography and not, you know, made up by people drawing lines on a map.

Q: Yeah, and of course they had done a number on the Italians at the Battle of Adwa I guess back in the —

NAGY: Oh yeah.

Q: — turn of the — just before the turn of the century.

NAGY: The largest, you know, single loss for a European power against a native army, ever. So yeah, no, the Eth — and they were — Ethiopia was never, ever really colonized.

Q: No. And actually the Ethiop — the Italians I'm told had done a pretty good job with roads and things like that.

NAGY: Yeah, they were very good at it. They did a number of roads mostly in Eritrea and railroads and — but like I said, they never fully — they were never able to colonize the southern part of Ethiopia.

Q: Now, was there any connection with Djibouti at all?

NAGY: Oh, absolutely because Ethiopia depended on — Djibouti was one of the ports. The connection was much tighter the second time I went back as ambassador, because by then Ethiopia was the world largest land locked country. At this time (1984) there were still

two Ethiopian ports, Massawa and Assab, which were operating, although both ports were under siege. The countryside around them was occupied by rebels. So they had to have armed convoys going into and out of the ports.

Q: Kenya, how stood that?

NAGY: Mombassa was a little too far away. The Somali ports — again at that time Somalia was a hostile country. Port Sudan again, was at that time a hostile country. So Ethiopia basically, they were depending on Assab, Massawa, and to a lesser extent Djibouti, because the railroad out of Addis went to Djibouti.

Q: How were relations between Ethiopia and Kenya?

NAGY: They were OK. They were OK. They were about as correct and civil as possible. Kenya's northern frontier is a very lawless area, so you know, for Kenya the Ethiopian border was kind of their wild border.

Q: Yeah. Were there any missionaries in —

NAGY: Oh yeah, we had very, very good friends. Sudan Interior Mission, SIM, now I think they call themselves just SIM, they were there. And they were missionaries, but they were also doing development work. They were some very long-term missionaries there we became very good friends with.

Q: And the Ethiopian Government sort of let them do their thing?

NAGY: They did. They kicked — if someone got to be a little bit too active they would get kicked out. But they were a number throughout the country who were doing like, water projects, and they were very loved by the local people. So the government was somewhat careful to not screw around with them.Q: Well, now you know, in the international sphere, I

take it Ethiopia was probably the closest to the Soviets of any of the countries in Africa in a way.

NAGY: Oh, absolutely. Down the line.

Q: But did the Soviets get anything out of this?

NAGY: Well, not rea — I mean the Soviets were supplying Ethiopia with arms. Ethiopians were supplying the Soviets with diplomatic support, but that was about it. And you know, once Gorbachev came in and he realized what a — what a loss it was, I think he very quickly cut his losses, and that's when the Ethiopian regime really went down the tubes when there was no more Soviet weapons.

Q: Well, then you left there in '86?

NAGY: Left in '86 and I went back to Washington to take the econ course and study French because I was — I was designated to go off as DCM to Lom# because my first charg# in Ethiopia, David Korn was named ambassador to Togo and he asked for me as his DCM, even though I was under grade at the time. So that was very fortuitous.

Q: Yeah. I interviewed both David and his wife.

NAGY: Roberta.

Q: She was quite active in Ethiopia, wasn't she?

NAGY: She was very active because she actually served as a public affairs officer. We had this situation, you know, which I mentioned. The government limited the number of employees we could have there, so every single spouse was strongly encouraged to work. And Roberta was acting PAO (public affairs officer). For a while my wife was acting PAO, and she was also the CLO (community liaison officer). I mean it was a situation where everybody worked.

Q: Well, in many ways that of course helped the morale a lot, didn't it?

NAGY: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Q: But then — so you came back and took the econ course. How'd you find that?

NAGY: Very difficult. I had not had any econ in college, not the — not the nitty gritty econ. And as DCM in Lom# I would be responsible for managing all the substantive areas. I was signed up for the econ course and then I had not had French since high school. I had to take French. Econ course, wonderful course director, Lisa Fox. She has been there forever. And it was the equivalent of a bachelor's degree of economics in six months.

Q: Oh boy.

NAGY: It was fantastic.

Q: Well, how did you and your wife work out the twins, the —

NAGY: Triplets.

Q: — the States, and the econ course.

NAGY: Triplets.

Q: Triplets, I'm sorry.

NAGY: Yeah. Well, she, you know, I mean that was the deal. She, she worked fulltime taking care of the family and I worked outside of the house, she worked inside the house. She worked a lot harder but the pay was lousy.

Q: Yeah. Well, then so you're off to Lom#.

NAGY: I'm off to Lom#. That would have been 1987.

Q: And you were there for how long?

NAGY: I was there for three years, from '87 to 1990. I had two ambassadors. David Korn first and very — he retired after about a year. It was funny. He — I think he became disgusted with the ridiculousness of the department's administrative regulation regarding things like representation, where they switched because they had to account for every grain of salt, you know, we sprinkled for a representation event. And I think he had enough and he wanted to write his books and, you know, get on with, with that side of his life. So he retired. And then Rush Taylor came in as ambassador. So I was with David for about a year and then with Rush for about two years. Rush Taylor recently died, I'm —

Q: Yeah, luckily I — I mean he seemed full — hell, I interviewed him.

NAGY: Great guy. Rush was a wonderful guy. But David was a wonderful guy too. We got along really, really well with both of them. I — for me I was a privilege serving both of them as deputies.

Q: All right, well let's talk about Lom# — the state is —

NAGY: The state is Togo.

Q: — Togo.

NAGY: President Gnassingbe Eyadema - Proletarian president who was very close to the United States. He considered himself a major supporter of Ronald Reagan. He had two very bad neighbors: Jerry Rawlings on one side in Ghana — who was a populous African, slash, socialist and a devout Marxist — and Benin on the other side, General K#r#kou. On the north in Burkina Faso he had first a populists African - Thomas Sankara - who was killed and the government taken over by Compaore who kind of also followed the socialist model. President Eyad#ma used to joke that his best neighbor was the sea.

Q: Yeah.

NAGY: He considered himself a strong support of the United States. In turn, he expected us to support him. He was a consistent human rights violator, but in those days we overlooked that. And he was one of our strongest allies in Africa. This, you know, this was pre — this was while the Soviet Union was still in existence, so we overlooked his — his — his phony elections and we overlooked his human rights violations. Of course he was not as bad as some of our, quote unquote, “friends,” like Mobutu, but he was surely not a democrat.

Q: Well, what are we talking about, human rights? I mean what were the violations?

NAGY: Oh, you know people did disappear, people were no doubt tortured. It was a very small country so the joke was — back then there was that commercial about E.F. Hutton. You know, someone goes into a bar and mentions E.F. Hutton and everyone gets quiet. Well, it was the same in Lom# and with Eyad#ma. If anyone mentioned his name everything would go quiet. He had a very extensive intelligence apparatus, which kept him well informed as to what was going on in the country. He was an insomniac, and the word was that his ministers slept in their clothes because he would call a minister at any time, day or night. And they would have to jump in their car and go to the presidential palace. Every decision was made by Eyad#ma, every single decision. The Americans had wonderful access. The French had wonderful access.

Q: Who ran the intelligence service? I mean who set it up? Was it the French or?

NAGY: He had a number of “seconded” French officials attached directly to the presidency who I think ran the Togolese Intelligence Service. He had a French officer, who ran the Togolese Air Force, another French officer ran the Togolese Navy, and another French officer who ran the finance — the finances.

Q: Well, did you find that — did the French consider us competitors or by this time had that, you know, early on —

NAGY: As competitors. They saw us as messing around their turf. As a result, both of my ambassadors had horrible relations with their French counterparts.

Q: How about sort of at the DCM level? Sometimes — there's been a pattern where the DCMs get along pretty well but the ambassadors don't.

NAGY: I got along really well with my French counterparts, very, very well. And we would exchange information and you know, exchange pleasantries while our bosses, you know, threw knives at each other. And our bosses knew that we were talking together. Even on their security side, we — we supported the Surete (police), the French supported the Gendarmerie (special police) The French very strongly supported the Togolese Armed Forces, but our military attach# that came out of Dakar also did some programs with the Togolese.

Q: Good morning. Today is November 5, 2010. We had left you in Togo and you said if you thought of anything more you'd talk about it, but then we'll move on.

NAGY: OK, so we finished in Togo, I guess.

Q: Yeah. So what was the timing and what did you do?

NAGY: Finished in Togo in 1990. So what happened was it was right on — you know, the Soviet Union had basically — it was collapsing or collapsed, and just — the interesting thing is just as I was leaving Togo we were starting to have a discussion among the senior people in the Africa Bureau about democracy in Africa. It had been, you know, during the, the Cold War days the Soviets had their African dictators and we had our African dictators, and human rights were not that — were not that major of an issue. The, the, the major priority was blocking the Soviet Union. So I was in the country of Togo and Eyad#ma had

been president there since he took power in the first coup in Africa and was elected head of state in Africa, and that really didn't give us much heartburn, you know, that — and he would have these sham elections and be reelected by 99% of the votes cast, and we never took much objection to that. But all of a sudden, you know, I'm leaving Togo and now all of a sudden for the United States Government democratization, human rights, good governance are starting to emerge as genuine issues over, you know, who are the Soviet-inclined states and who are the Western-inclined states. I did a direct transfer from Lom# to Cameroon. We got on the plane at Lom# one night I think shortly after the, the July 4th festivities, stayed around to help that. And I remember Pickering was on the plane with us because he was also transiting, and we got off the plane in Douala and so — I guess I started Friday in Lom# and finished the Friday at my new posting in Cameroon.

Q: The capital of Cameroon is?

NAGY: Yaound#.

Q: Ah-huh.

NAGY: We had a — we had a small — it wasn't a consulate office, it was a liaison office in Douala basically to serve some of the interior posts in Africa, which received their — their shipments through the port of Douala. So we had a principle officer and I think a public affairs officer there and one reporting officer. But yeah, Yaound# was an interior city and it was a much — it was a much bigger embassy than what we had had in Togo.

Q: Now who was the ambassador?

NAGY: I was coming in as deputy to the very distinguished and honorable Frances Cook.

Q: Oh-ho. How did that work?

NAGY: It worked great.

Q: Because Frances Cook has got a —

NAGY: Pardon me?

Q: Frances cook has got a mixed reputation.

NAGY: Well, she was — Frances was extremely intelligent, extremely energetic, extremely dynamic, and extremely demanding. She had very, very high standards and did not — absolutely did not suffer incompetence or mediocrity or fools. She had 100 good ideas every day and as her deputy I had to figure out which of those one or two were realistic.

Q: OK, let's talk about the Cameroons first. You were there from 1990 to when?

NAGY: I was there from 1990 to 1993 and I served two ambassadors, Frances and Harriet Isom.

Q: All right. Well, let's talk — before we move to the embassy operations, what was the situation in the Cameroons when you arrived?

NAGY: Cameroon of course had been a German colony and then after World War I it was divided between Britain and France. The majority part was taken by France with Western Cameroon remaining Anglophone. They tried a federation first, but then they went to unitary states where the, the Francophones definitely were the dominant force. So the Anglophones felt themselves besieged and wronged. The president of Cameroon had been in government a long time. He had been vice president to Ahidjo, the first president. When the first president died Paul Biya took over as president. And when I arrived there it was a uniparty authoritarian government. During my time there they did open it up to other political parties and I went through an extremely messy election with lots and lots of violence and then a six-month period of “Villes Mortes” (ghost towns), or what the opposition called the “Ghost Town Campaign,” where they literally tried to shut down the urban areas of the country. Extremely, extremely tight, tense, and troubled three years.

Q: OK, well before we get to all that, when you got there — let's talk a bit about the embassy and what were the American interests in the Cameroons at the time?

NAGY: American interests were fairly limited. We had a U.S. — a subsidiary of petroleum companies through Shell called Pecten that was pumping oil offshore from Douala. Aside from that, Cameroon was a fairly large country in Central Africa, strategically placed. Aside from that, it was mainly good governance, democratization, and development.

Q: Well, now had the Soviets or the Libyans been messing around in the country before?

NAGY: No, not at all. Cameroon had been very, very closely aligned with France. It was one of their client states. It was also a listening post on Chad because when Chad would go through periodic conniptions we had to go and help evacuate folks out of there to Cameroon.

Q: OK, well what was the French presence like when you were there?

NAGY: The French presence was basically very influential on the commercial side and the president, Paul Biya, was very closely tied to the French for his political support. Because the opposition was Anglophones mostly, or lead by the Anglophones, whereas the French were apoplectic over the thought of, you know, English gaining a foothold somewhere else. So one of their reasons for supporting Paul Biya was to keep the Anglophones at bay.

Q: OK, well you're an Anglophoner.

NAGY: Yeah.

Q: First place, did the British play any role there?

NAGY: Yeah, as a matter fact they did. I mean the active embassies were the French, the British, because it had been — a part of it had been a former British colony, and then of

course we, the Americans. The Western Cameroonians had very close ties to Britain. And so they were there. As a matter fact, I think either shortly before I got there or shortly after I left Prince Charles made a visit to the country.

Q: Well, now how did we play the game with — say with the French Embassy and the British Embassy? Was that a problem?

NAGY: It was a huge problem with the French because the French were quite happy with the autocratic regime. They were quite happy that the regime stole the election in I believe 1991, whereas our ambassador - Frances Cook - was extremely, extremely vociferous in supporting the opposition and supporting the forces for liberalization and good governance and local NGOs. We brought in NDI (National Democratic Institute) before the election. I mean Frances Cook came close to being PNGed (persona non grata) out of the country.

Q: Well, I interviewed her about — haven't got her to clear her interview yet, but she talks about getting involved with the women's movement.

NAGY: Oh absolutely, yeah. Yeah, there was a good characterization — one of the oppositions, they did a caricature cartoon of, of all of the opponents of the regime in a parade. And out in front is Frances Cook —

Q: Well —

NAGY: — leading everybody.

Q: Yeah. Well, did you find yourself in the almost a traditional role of DCM, of trying as well as you could to telling Frances cool it or not, or what?

NAGY: Not really because I was, I was kind of whipped or very much in spirit. My — my biggest role was to try to make things practical and pragmatic and, and to keep the morale up because the staff did feel under pressure. They felt like maybe there were too many demands put on there for time and effort. So it was — I did have — I had a large internal

challenge when Frances was out of the country. And she was called off at a very critical time to work on a promotion board and I served as charg# then. So to — also because — some of the government people refused to speak to her. They would speak to me. Which made it very awkward because of course my loyalty was to my ambassador and, you know, to her program. But at the same time, if a high-ranking government person wants to speak to me I can't very well shut him up. What I did of course always was if I spoke to anybody I would let Frances know who I spoke to and what was said.

Q: Well, was she you might say aware of the situation and accept it and not thinking that you were trying to usurp something?

NAGY: Absolutely. Yeah, she was — she was aware of the situation. At no point was there — we were always a team, we were always partners. We always presented a unified front. So no, there was absolutely no fracture between us. But the Cameroonian Government — I mean I remember when, when she left and I was charg# in between Frances and Harriet. You know, I think the government organized a dinner for me like, two days after she left. So.

Q: Well, so I mean during this, she was there and you were both there during this messy election, you say.

NAGY: Yes, very, yeah.

Q: Could you sort of describe it?

NAGY: Well, basically shortly after I arrived there the president was pressured into allowing opening up the structure to multi-parties. And immediately, all the opposition coalesced around a party out of the Anglophone part of Cameroon led by a, a charismatic, dynamic English-speaker, John Fru Ndi, and basically you had the president and his parties, you had John Fru Ndi, his party was I think the social democratic front. Then you had a smaller opposition party out of the north. Cameroon is not just two parts, it's three

parts because there's also northern Islamic part, which although they're Francophone, they are — they definitely have their own characters as an Islamic — kind of like Northern Nigeria. And during the election — I observed the election. It was obvious to anyone who was there that the vote was overwhelmingly for the opposition. But when the official figures were announced the president won by like a .2% or something like. So — and I saw the voting take place in army bases, for example, and saw the soldiers voting massively for the opposition. So it was patent that the government had stolen the election. And the French maintained support for the government. We were very ambivalent. You know, we were not going to say that the government is illegitimate, but we — we basically did not say anything and at that point the government considered us very hostile and they came quite close to kicking Ambassador Cook out of the country.

Q: Well, was there any debate within the embassy or with the desk or with Washington about saying this is an illegitimate election because —

NAGY: NDI — NDI published a report because they were —

Q: NDI is?

NAGY: National Democratic Institute.

Q: NDI, ah.

NAGY: NDI published a report on the elections and basically said that the — that the outcome was questionable. So they said — they said very clearly that it was an illegitimate election. And of course the Cameroonian Government, as so many African governments, they don't distinguish between somebody like NDI and the official U.S. Government.

Q: Oh yeah.

NAGY: So basically the embassy was — the entire embassy was persona non grata for a period of time, especially as violence erupted around the opposition parts of the country

and the government tried to restore order. They tried marshal law in places. It was an extremely dangerous situation.

Q: Well, I mean were you seeing the country on the brink of a civil war?

NAGY: It didn't quite get to the civil war point, but it got to a major internal insurrection that the government was having all kinds of trouble keeping the lid on. And there were certain problems of the government, which were an open rebellion. But like I said, 80% of the population was Francophone, 20% was Anglophone. So, the Francophone areas were fairly restive, the Anglophone areas were in an open rebellion, and the large urban cities were again a very strong opposition stronghold, so they were extremely tense.

Q: Well, how did that reflect on the operation of the embassy?

NAGY: It was very difficult. It was very difficult. It was difficult getting the kids to school, it was difficult making everyday purchases. We did not, however, go to a draw down. We came close to it a couple times, but the trip wires were never crossed. You know, the airports remained open. But there were some very, very scary weeks.

Q: Well now, did the French have troops there?

NAGY: No, the French did not. The closest place the French had troops were in Chad and in Gabon. And it would have been a disaster for the French to have brought in troops because then that would have tilted the country toward civil war.

Q: Well, I mean were you in close consultation with the French over the situation?

NAGY: I would not say consultation. We were very close consultation with the British, but the French — we and the French had a — a very chilly relationship because we saw them as supporting an illegitimate regime and they saw us as interfering in their backyard.

Q: Well —

NAGY: At that point for them their primary objective in Africa was stability.

Q: Well, did the French have any real stake in the Cameroons? I mean, you know, sometimes they're —

NAGY: Nah, they had fairly large businesses, per se. They had some of the big French trading houses, I think they had some French banks, and you know for them, for the French prestige is quite an important thing as well.

Q: Were we able to sort of through our USAID operations make any inroads or at least let the Cameroonians know who we were and how we stood on things?

NAGY: Oh, we were extremely popular, extremely popular. I mean Frances could have been elected president with a, you know, 80% vote. So yeah. The word was very much out about who were the champions of democracy. We had opposition, people coming to the embassy all the time, you know, in groups. We had demonstrations in front of the embassy in favor of us, what we were doing. Poor demonstrators got pepper sprayed by the, you know, by the, by the trucks. So yeah, as far as U.S. policy goes with the people at Cameroon we were — we were up there.

Q: Did we have a Peace Corps or anything like that?

NAGY: We did have a Peace Corps. We never — we did not have to pull them out. We had a fairly large AID program and we had a Peace Corps.

Q: What was the AID program doing?

NAGY: They were into helping Cameroon adjust with economic restructuring and also they were working very closely to develop a land-grant type university in Western Cameroon which was still in the French zone but close to the English zone.

Q: Did the Cameroonians play any kind of role? I mean sometimes these smaller countries, they send their people to other African countries to serve as clerks or merchants or something like that. Sort of what roles did the Cameroons play in the West African complex?

NAGY: They're — they're not like Nigerian, you know, where they're ever present throughout other countries. They're much more in for — I mean Cameroon itself has — I think next to Chad they have the largest number of indigenous languages of any country. So it's a huge conglomeration of ethnic groups and of geographic areas. Cameroon has the largest mountain in West Africa, Mount Cameroon. It has the second wettest point on earth after Japan. Again, that's a point closest to the Cameroon/Nigeria border on the coast. And yet, the very northern part touches N'Djamena, Chad. So it's a huge variety, pygmies in the east and very poor internal road structure. So it's difficult to communicate between regions of the country. But on the other hand, it's quite developed in African terms. And it was very prosperous. I mean once upon a time, until oil prices crashed I think, Cameroon had the highest per capita consumption of Champagne in the world.

Q: (laughs) Well, did you get out and travel much?

NAGY: Yeah, absolutely. I did. I'm a firm believe in getting out of the capital city and traveling. I mean in Guinea I was known as the ambassador who traveled more than all the others put together.

Q: Well, what about the north and the Muslims? In a way what type of Muslims were they and what sort of role were they playing?

NAGY: Well, they were Sunni. The first president had been a Muslim president from the north. So during his tenure he focused infrastructure and development assistance to the north. We used to kid around, you know, there wasn't much of the north which was not paved. You had a string of cities in the north, which were quite prosperous. They were

trader cities and Northern Cameroon has very close links to the Islamic sultan that's in Nigeria, Northern Nigeria. So again, north was not — there was no fundamentalist Islam or any calling for Sharia or anything like that. It was fair — it was peaceful, it was stable.

NAGY: Yeah. So — so it was not as restive politically. So after the elections there were really no big problems in the north because the regime came to an understanding with the northern political leaders.

Q: What about sort of political rights? I mean were there lot of political prisoners and that sort of thing?

NAGY: Not a lot. There were some — some political violence and there were a handful of very prominent political prisoners, whether they were under house arrest or in jail, as I said, the Cameroonian Government treated the Anglophone region as occupied territory, kind of like we did with the south after the Civil War.

Q: Yeah.

NAGY: And so a lot of the troops who were in Cameroon happened to be Francophones. So there was a huge amount of friction and tension between the local population and the, and the government authorities. I mean they would send prefects to the Anglophone provinces who couldn't even speak English. That did not go over very well. Also, they neglected the west tremendously with the road infrastructure. They did not want to put a road network in the west.

Q: Well, were there oil companies sniffing around?

NAGY: The oil companies were offshore. There was oil being pumped, but it was one of those areas where you had diminishing supply, and I'm not even sure if they're producing anymore.

Q: In a way it was probably a blessing to a country.

NAGY: Yeah, absolutely. And then the oil to the north was on the Chadian side. So the pipe line goes through Cameroon, but the actual oil deposits are in Chad.

Q: Well, did any of the surrounding countries have an undue influence?

NAGY: On the west I would say that Nigeria did. You know, Cameroon and Nigeria had the border disputes over the Bakassi Peninsula. The countries to the south, Central African Republic and Equatorial Guinea, going a little bit further, Gabon, those countries are in the same ethnic group as the leadership in Cameroon. So when those guys got together they didn't speak to each other in French; they spoke to each other in I think it's in Nwando or Bulu, or, or, or one of their Central African languages.

Q: Did you get any high level visits while you were there?

NAGY: Yeah, we did. We had — we had a number of CODELS (congressional delegations), including Senator Specter, who was a huge, you know, huge pain, having to deal with him. But he was the guy that wanted to have a squash court available wherever he went.

Q: Oh, my God.

NAGY: Yeah.

Q: (laughs) How did you —

NAGY: That was after Frances. That was with Harriet Isom.

Q: How did you manage that or?

NAGY: Well, one of the hotels had a squash court and, you know, he — we actually, you know, we made — but he wanted an air-conditioned squash court. That was his thing. He didn't want a non-air-conditioned — of all the CODELs I've had, you know, I'd say he was the biggest pain.

Q: Well, what was he after? Why was he there other than to play squash?

NAGY: I have no idea and I don't think he did either. I think he and at that time Senator Pressler, the two of them decided to visit some African countries. You know, they went on a string of them. And then Newsweek I think issued a negative article about their visit so then they came back through it and insisted on trying to do something substantive.

Q: Could you figure out anything from the context?

NAGY: They — we had to meet with a foreign minister and talk about the importance of human rights.

Q: Oh God. Well, so many of these delegations that come through are really very good. I mean —

NAGY: Oh, absolutely. In Ethiopia I saw that. You know, when I was administrative officer in the mid '80s in Ethiopia we had I think 130 or whatever members of Congress come through. And they were there genuinely to see what they could do to help. But then in some other countries I've had CODELs which were a total waste of time.

Q: Yeah. Well, when Frances Cook was there, being of such an exacting nature, did you find yourself in the position of trying to soften her influence on, on disgruntled employees and all?

NAGY: She was — she was really good in that she, she gave me a, you know, great deal of independence in dealing with the internal staff. And, and for me to ask people to do the things went over I think a little bit better than the way she would ask people to do things.

Q: Well, when she left about halfway through, was that?

NAGY: It was almost — I think I was with Frances almost two years. Then I was charg# for a while and then Harriet came for my last year. And again, Harriet was an absolute delight to work with. Harriet was also very hard charging, but she obviously came with instructions from Washington to soften the criticism of the government and to — to try to be on more positive terms with them. I mean Frances, when she left she scorched the runways. You know, they were so happy to get her out of the country. So the Cameroonians were — and I think Harriet was just as concerned about democracy and human rights and she came with a much softer tone so the government immediately embraced her as not being Frances.

Q: Well, but all is said and done. These two ambassadors, did they get anything done? Human rights wise.

NAGY: I think that — well, what they got done was — I think that the government's actions were definitely moderated towards democracy, multi party elections, than they would have been without the oversight from the United States. Certainly I think human rights violations were reduced because they knew we were watching. And even more importantly, we had instant credibility with almost 100% of the Cameroonian people. You know, they saw the United States as the great world wide champion of democracy and they intensely disliked the French.

Q: How did they get this, understand this?

NAGY: Well, from the huge publicity that went around with the things that Frances did and the things that Frances said. And Frances also toured all over the country. I mean she was a — she was a rock star.

Q: Well, did — were we carrying sort of the human rights, democracy ball on our — pretty much on our own in the Cameroons?

NAGY: I'd say we and the Brits. But of course the Brits were not nearly as big a player as we are, just because, you know, they're a small island nation and we're a huge continental nation, so.

Q: Well, were we able to use things like leader grants and all to further the cause?

NAGY: We had a very active public diplomacy program. We — we tried to help local NGOs. It was — as a matter fact, the very first time during my career in Africa I heard of an African NGO that was supporting democracy was there. it was a group I think called GERDAS, which came out of Benin. You know Benin was the first African country that kind of did the post-communist world democratic transformation. So we thought it was a great idea to use other African NGOs to kind of spur things in Cameroon. But an awful lot happened during those three years. From my point of view I saw a total transition from the United States winking at, at authoritarian dictatorships to the United States confronting them head on.

Q: Was this the beginning of the collapse of the Soviet Union the reason or different personnel in Washington or what?

NAGY: Oh no, it was obviously the demise of the Soviet Union. It was only after the demise of the Soviet Union — I mean it was like the poor — you know, the scene out of the Humphrey Bogart movie where the cop says, “What? Gambling? Here?”

Q: Yeah.

NAGY: That's literally what we were saying about human rights. “What? These people are committing human rights abuses? How can that be?”

But I'm sure, you know, African dictator after African dictator kind of looked in the mirror and said, “What's going on? Why did my best friend, the United States, all of a sudden say that I'm a human rights abuser?”

Q: Well, did you have any dialogue with the French representation there?

NAGY: I did. I did. I talked with their DCM and the guy was pretty well an arrogant twit, so I always did my best to have good, good cordiality with my French colleagues but in Cameroon it was extremely difficult because the guy was very eccentric and very arrogant.

Q: Was there sort of an ex-patriot community there that was at all influential?

NAGY: No. No. Not really. No. Not at all.

Q: Well, then in '93 you left.

NAGY: In '93 I left. I got a call from Jack Bryant. I had been elected to be the state vice president for AFSA (American Foreign Service Association), although my candidate, my presidential candidate to become president of AFSA was not elected.

Q: Who was that?

NAGY: I ran together with Joe Melrose.

Q: Uh-huh.

NAGY: And instead of I think Jeff Davidow was elected.

Q: Uh-huh.

NAGY: So I really was not comfortable about going on to serve under another — another president, so Jack Bryant called me and said, “Hey Tibor, would you be interested in going and being deputy chief of mission in Lagos, Nigeria because there is a political appointee going out there.” And so I talked to my family, we looked, and I said yes, we'll go to Lagos. And so that was — that was the next adventure was leaving Cameroon in '93 and going back to Texas for a little bit of home leave and then coming back to West Africa and starting out as DCM Lagos. The messiest — if I thought Cameroon had been a mess I did not know what I was talking about, because Nigeria in '93 was an even bigger mess.

Q: Well, before we talk about that mess, quick thing. What were the issues with the American Foreign Service Association and where you felt that you'd be uncomfortable? Were there real issues?

NAGY: Well, the biggest thing was that Joe and I felt very strongly — both of us were admin people and we were much more focused on the everyday life, bread and butter issues of the Foreign Service officers overseas. I had never thought that AFSA should be a, you know, quote unquote, policy guiding think tank kind of operation. I thought that AFSA members overseas cared much more about their household getting there in one piece and in a timely manner and them being able to ship their dog on a plane as opposed to, you know, what great policy pronouncements they're going to make.

Q: No.

NAGY: Because there's enough think tanks out there to do that job. So that was my job and I know it's Joe's view, whereas I thought that Jeff and his group were a little bit more on the policy side. So, so I didn't, you know, so at that point I just said no, thank you. And Jeff said, you know, by all means, you know, you were elected so serve. But I felt much better about going off and doing my third DCM shift.

Q: Well, first place sort of career-wise how did you feel about DCMing?

NAGY: Oh, I enjoyed it. I love being a DCM and I was a little hesitant about being a DCM to a, a political appointee, number one, number two, especially since my whole life since I've been a U.S. I've been a very strong Republican. And obviously Walter Carrington would be a very ideological Democrat, you know, being appointed as a political appointee by the Clinton Administration. So I was somewhat reluctant. But then when Walter called me and said, you know, I've been told that you're a really good DCM and I wanted to ask if you'd be my DCM. I said, “Walter, I'd be delighted, but you need to understand that my political philosophy's always been a Republican. Would that bother you?” And he said not at all. So we, we embarked on a partnership that, you know, also turned into a friendship.

Q: Well, Walter comes from — I mean he was not a typical political appointee.

NAGY: Oh no, no.

Q: I mean he — I interviewed him way before this. He'd been ambassador before. I mean —

NAGY: Well, he was ambassador in Senegal for a couple of weeks. He got there just in time for the election and as soon as the election was over the Republicans told him to get out of there. And then he went on to be Peace Corps director for Africa and then he was I think CEO of the African American Institute. Also he had academic background —

Q: At Howard.

NAGY: Yes. And he — and just fundamentally he was just a tremendously, tremendously nice guy. And you know, and I got to Nigeria — Bill Swing was still there, and Bill Swing was there. It had been on the eve of the election having been held by Babangida and Babangida then basically not following through and allowing the election victor to take over the presidency, so — and the American Embassy basically forced through pressure Babangida to leave power and Babangida handed over the presidency to a — to a nonentity. And the embassy also kicked — I mean the Nigerian Government kicked two

people out of the country. They were holding up visas. It took me forever to get a visa and the Black Caucus was urging the White House to not send Walter out as a protest against the Nigerian Government. We had authorized departure so a great deal of the embassy, especially of the dependents, family members were in the States. It was a heck of a time to be walking into an embassy.

Q: Well, of course Nigeria being this — one of the largest — it is the — about the largest country in Africa or?

NAGY: 140 million people, yep.

Q: Yeah. So did you go as sort of — were you almost an instant charg# or?

NAGY: Well, I went there — I went there initially I became Bill Swing's deputy and Bill Swing was on his way to Haiti, but there was a certain amount of uncertainty as to whether or not he should leave because whether or not they were going to let Walter come out. But they decided that yeah, he needed to go ahead and go, so he left and I was there as charg# for quite a long period of time during the most turbulent and problematic period because of the Congressional Black Caucus was telling Walter not to come out, so I had no idea if I'd be getting an ambassador or not. The political tension was off the scale. Lagos was ungovernable at the best of times, but it had become totally violent because the hoodlums were using the political uncertainty to rob and rape and pillage. And you know, we — we were not sure of how in the heck to deal with this government, which was not a government. So eventually they let Walter come out, but it was a — it was a horrendous situation. And we had a very large embassy at Lagos and we were in the process of moving our embassy to the new city of Abuja. So we also had an operation in Abuja, we had a very small operation in the northern city of Kaduna, and we had basically a public affairs — American public affairs office in Ibadan.

Q: Well, how did we view the, the government of Nigeria or what passed for the government?

NAGY: Well, we didn't. We — we tried to have as little contact as possible because we considered them illegitimate and of course then they proceeded to become even more illegitimate when the — the caretaker was overthrown by a military triumvate and the rightful winner of the election, Chief Abiola was running around telling everybody that his, you know, mandate had been stolen from him. And he was causing rioting, demonstrations, violence, economic boycotts. And of course then you have Nigeria the eternal mess: no electricity, no water, high degree of crime, no infrastructure, corruption, kleptocracy. I mean it was a perfect storm of hell on earth.

Q: Did the army play a role?

NAGY: The army played a big role because the army — Walter arrived a couple of weeks later while he's on an upcountry trip. The chief of the armed forces telephoned the acting president and tells him to vacate the presidential offices in Abuja because they were coming up to take over. So there was a coup by telephone.

Q: Other than the takeover of the government, did the army play any — did it sort of settle things down?

NAGY: Well, yes and no. No because there was an instant uproar when they took over and there was a lot of, of isolated incidents of violence. But they finally did put the lid on. But for us, I mean we were now dealing with a doubly illegitimate government. It was — Walter was seen as a — even more so than Frances in Cameroon, Walter was seen as the enemy.

Q: Well, I mean here you are first place you're charg# and then DCM, I mean was there anybody you could deal with?

NAGY: When things were really important we actually dealt with the head of state, General Abacha. But the — now we had an even bigger problem than that because Walter was not seen by the State Department as a professional diplomat. Walter was seen as a — it was — it was — it was hugely difficult for Walter because Washington saw him as soft on the Nigerians and the Nigerians saw him as, as this, as this hardcore democrat who was there to lean on them and to try to pressure them to get out of power. So both, both United States and the Nigerian regime saw Walter as an enemy. I mean I would get calls from the State Department saying, you know, you got to get your ambassador to be tougher, you got to get your — and Walter was doing the absolute — Walter — Walter was not doing anything that I would not have done. And Washington was — had very unrealistic expectations of what the American ambassador could do with his Nigerian regime, and, and the State Department was getting unbelievable pressure from the Congressional Black Caucus to do something about Nigeria. Yet, at the same time, the oil companies were extremely happy with the Nigerian regime. So the oil companies were pressuring their Congress people to take it easy on the Nigerians.

Q: Can we stop here for just one second?

NAGY: Yeah.

Q: OK, I'm back in business. Did you have any either unofficial contact with the State Department where you can say hey, cut it out fellas, he's doing all he can? Or was anybody listening to you?

NAGY: Well, I tried. The problem was the office director, Peter Chaveas. He went on to be ambassador in I think Sierra Leone. Peter was the head of the office. Peter had been in Nigeria on an earlier tour and, and the folks in the Clinton White House at the NSC (National Security Council) — I mean they were just — they had the — they had the view toward Nigeria kind of like Susan Rice has today about Sudan. I mean it was — it was beyond — it was emotional. It was not — it was — it was not just intellectual or, or

strategic. In their gut they detested the Nigerian regime of Sani Abacha. So, so, so there was no reasonableness on either side.

Q: You keep mentioning the Black Caucus. Was there any sort of driving force there? Or sometimes it's a staff member or —

NAGY: Yeah. There was — but there was — but there were also a couple of the congressman, like Congressman Payne. On the other hand, there was William Jefferson from Louisiana who had lots of contributions from the oil company.

Q: Yeah, which later got him in a lot of trouble.

NAGY: So there was a real spastic kind of policy. It was not a unified policy towards Nigeria. And then within the staff also in Lagos I had the same flip. I had the Department of Commerce people, you know, who were very happy to deal with the regime or the Foreign Agricultural Service. Then I had the, you know, people on the human rights side. Then of course I had the Drug Enforcement people had to cooperate with the Nigerian law enforcement, and other various agencies. So it was — it was an extremely complicated arrangement and there was not — no unanimity of U.S. policy, U.S. Government policy, and yet Walter managed it I think brilliantly, but he never received the credit that he should have.

Q: Well, all of us who in the United States have dealt with sort of the over the internet, the confidence men and the basic criminality of the Nigerian in the United States and out, you know, it seems to be almost innate. Did that cause problems for you?

NAGY: Oh, yeah. I mean with Nigeria, I used to kid with my political counselor, Robert Downey that a week in Nigeria was like a full tour anywhere else. It was just unbelievable the stuff that came up, whether it was 419(the section of Nigerian law dealing with scams) people, you know, being arrested by the Nigerian security service; U.S. businesspeople showing up and being delivered to the embassy, you know, naked after having been

scammed, you know, through these schemes and being left on the side of the road. It was just unbelievable. It was one thing after another. There was — we were always uncovering visa scams, you know, within the consular section or our security guards selling visa application forms to the crowd. It was just unbelievable.

Q: Well, I take it you felt that at least for the political stand we were taking that you weren't getting for it with the State Department, that —

NAGY: The interesting thing was, I got credit for it being the career guy, and I was a runner up for Deputy Chief of Mission for the Year. On the other hand — and the White House, the NSC and the State Department really appreciated the reporting we did. But they really did not appreciate Walter, you know, which was really an anomaly.

Q: Well, you know, had Walter brought with him any residue of, I don't know, dislikes or anything like that from his work before or —

NAGY: No! As a matter of fact, within a couple of weeks Walter had hooked up with a local Nigerian woman, a doctor, and they ended up getting married, and they're still married.

Q: I mean did —

NAGY: Again, Walter was quite popular among the Nigerian elite. He had a million friends, you know, among the Nigerian intellectual classes. And you know, Nigeria's one of those African countries where there is a very highly developed indigenous business, cultural, intellectual elite. You know, Nigeria had world-class universities until they ran them into the ground. So I mean as a — I don't want to be facetious, but it is a real country in any sense of the world, unlike say, Togo, you know, Mali, or Chad.

Q: I've heard people who went out to the university as a visiting scholar and said it was, you know, it really was very sad because the student — I mean they're just, they were always on strike or something.

NAGY: Oh yeah. No. They had phenomenal university structure. They had a wonderful research institute, the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, International Institute of Tropical Agriculture there in Ibadan where they were doing world-class research. But as the corruption, as the political instability went on and to, you know, followed through all these institutions just lost out. But the — but there is left behind a tremendously educated class of people, very, you know, well to do, and tremendously intellectual. So it was easy for us to engage. And they were the class of people with huge wealth, whether it was through corruption or trading, or oil, or whatever, they were the — or drugs — they were there.

Q: As DCM, you're responsible for the safety. What about the safety of the staff?

NAGY: Well, we had many security advisory committee meetings.

Q: Yeah, but anyway.

NAGY: But anyway, yeah, we had lots and lots of meetings, lots of meetings. And you know, there were many different views within the, within the council and I had to kind of, you know, enforce discipline. But we had crises on every side because there was no electricity, there was no water, the houses were falling apart, the school was always an issue, crime was always an issue. Lagos airport was the only major international airport in the world that was deemed unsafe. You couldn't travel throughout the country properly without facing armed robbers, you couldn't live in your house without facing armed robbers. Personal security was terrible. You couldn't buy stuff. The government hated us. The climate was terrible. Very, very unhealthful conditions all around. I'd never seen an embassy with negative synergy until I got there. You know, morale was consistently awful because you couldn't get people to be posted there and the people we did get posted there were invariably two grades lower than the position required. And yet, it was a very large embassy. It was a huge consular workload. You know, the consular officers were under siege — I mean everybody in that mission was constantly under siege. And then

you add to that the political uncertainties and the — and the instability and it was just — it was unending agony.

Q: Well, were we able to make the U.S. any headway on trying to bring about order and democracy at all?

NAGY: Not at all. That only happened after I left and Abacha was poisoned by two prostitutes and Abiola suffered a heart attack when in the company of Pickering and Susan Rice.

Q: Yeah, yeah, I interviewed Tom and talked about, you know, having the chief of state die on you during a visit, trying to get the hell out of there.

NAGY: Exactly, so. But no, Nigeria's been a holy mess. It will always be a holy mess. It's just unbelievable. It is — unless someone experiences it, it is — you cannot adequately articulate the difficulties of, of working and living there.

Q: Well, how long were you there?

NAGY: Two years.

Q: I mean did you feel that —

NAGY: Walter wanted me to stay for a third, but my — the school was no longer — you know my kids finished 10th grade there and there was no 11th or 12th grade at the school. So we went on — we went on back to Washington to take the senior seminar.

Q: Did you see any light at the end of the tunnel while you were there?

NAGY: None whatsoever.

Q: What does this do to you? You know, we're an optimistic group. Americans and Foreign Service officers like to be with winners and —

NAGY: You go with small victories and small achievements. I mean we were in the process of transferring our embassy from Lagos to Abuja so you get the best housing you can in Abuja and you look for a great office building and you make your people, you know, as comfortable as possible, you give them the kind of support, you try to get them professional, you know, professional recognition, you get them good onward assignments, given them awards, you get them promoted, and you try to make sure that they get out of there as whole as possible.

Q: Well, how did you work getting out of there if the airport's not safe?

NAGY: Well, some people insisted on flying into Cotonou (Benin) and driving from there, so you know, otherwise you take a chance. And as a matter of fact, we did lose a plane — regularly Nigerian planes went down. And one that went into the lagoon I think we lost the husband of our commissary manager.

Q: Ooh.

NAGY: I mean I had a member of Congress come out there, J.C. Watts, a Republican from Oklahoma, and we were driving in from the airport and there had been — there was a dead body on the road, which had been there for a number of days that the cars obviously had, you know, just all driven over, so totally smushed. And J.C. could not believe it. And he said, “How do you people manage to live in a place like this?”

And I said, “Congressman, that is how we live in Nigeria. That's just how it is.” And he was absolutely shocked.

Q: God. Well, I find, you now, it's just incredible. Well off you go to the senior seminar. This must have seemed like —

NAGY: Pure heaven.

Q: (laughs) Yeah, I was going to say.

NAGY: We deserved it. You know, I, I did not feel guilty one day because after the hell of Nigeria I felt I have to leave the department opening. It was the year of the senior seminar and just actually being able to renew my spirits, my soul, and my mind.

Q: Well, you did this in what, '93 to '94?

NAGY: No, I was in — I was — '95. Because I was in Nigeria from '93 to '95.

Q: Oh, that's right. OK.

NAGY: So I did this summer of '95 to summer of '96 before going off as ambassador to Guinea.

Q: All right, well let's talk a bit about the senior seminar, which is now defunct. But how did you find it?

NAGY: Phenomenal. I thought it, it really improved my effectiveness as a representative for the United States of America and I think I did my job as ambassador much better having done the senior seminar, because the magic of the seminar was allowing the participants to gain familiarity with the issues that are important to Americans in every sector of our country.

Q: What things sort of struck you must that you —

NAGY: Well, we ended up — OK, we went out to the — we did the Chesapeake Bay and spent time with the watermen in the bay. We did Alaska, including the North Slope. You could see first hand — not Russia — from our front, you know, porch —

Q: (laughs)

NAGY: — like Sarah Palin, but we did, we saw the North Slope, we saw the small footprint, how effective they are ecologically, but also the other issues with, you know, with the, the, the polar bears becoming domestic garbage pests. But gained a sense of how different Alaska is in the west. Saw the Southwest. We were on the Mexican border, see the issues that our border guards have to deal with. We did the Southeast and saw how dynamic, you know, Atlanta, Charlotte, those places are. We saw the problem of the casinos in Phoenix and New Orleans. We — now I — I married a farmer's daughter so I know how farms operate, but my colleagues got to sit on a harvester in the Midwest and actually harvest some corn, visited Boston and New York. So you know, we got to see the country. It was fantastic.

Q: You mentioned the problems of the casinos. What were they?

NAGY: Well, the Indian reservations had run casinos, as well as other casinos, and the gambling, you know, addiction. And I, for example I did not realize that casinos paid out anywhere from 90 to 95 cents on every dollar they take in. So learned a lot about what makes our economy tick all across the country. And we saw some of the major military bases and what our military folks are capable of doing, which again, helped me tremendously to do my job as ambassador.

Q: Did you get any feel for this particular time for the problem of the Clinton Administration with strong opposition in Congress to shutting down the government and all that?

NAGY: That — well, it hit us a couple times because we were on trips when the government shut down and we had to cease our travels and go back and just sit in our houses, you know, for a couple days. So yeah, that was an issue.

Q: Were you trying to talk to people back in the African Bureau about Carrington and this situation in Nigeria, or was this all behind you?

NAGY: Well, that was pretty well behind me. I mean, I — and I think AF leadership changed too. And then Walter went on — his follow on DCM was Joe Melrose and, you know, Joe — Joe and I are both admin officers, but we also came out of different schools as to how we handle our staff, things like that, which I saw later on when he was ambassador in Sierra Leone and I was in Guinea and his embassy got shut down so he shared a little bit of time in Guinea. But, but Walter continued. You know, he finished his tour there and left there and now he's back in academia and he's a respected academician and a respected expert on Nigeria. So I think it was just that peculiar period of time. And I think the department got to appreciate him a little bit more as things went on.

Q: Yeah, well always the difference between, you know, the home office and the field office is replicated in the Foreign Service again and again.

NAGY: Oh yeah, absolutely. And especially with a country that really, really mattered, like Nigeria.

Q: Yeah, it's not one that you can just sort of brush aside.

NAGY: No, because there were just so many different things going on. So many different things going on. It was — like I said, it was every week a new crisis.

Q: Good. OK, well I think Tibor this is probably a good place to stop.

NAGY: OK, and let's, let's figure out when we want to do this.

Q: Today is December 6, 2010. OK, you know, looking back on it, Tibor, what do you think you got out of the senior seminar?

NAGY: Well, having been out of the States for so many years, because I was out eight years in a row, and it was wonderful to actually come back and see firsthand the real concerns of our country, you know, for a variety of segments. Because you know, that senior seminar is phenomenal because you got to travel all over the country and talk to farmers and border guards and all kinds of people, so — even Chesapeake Bay oyster — oystermen. So it was just phenomenal. So going back overseas after that as an ambassador gave me a really good idea of what the concerns were of Americans, and I felt like because of it I could truly represent all of America as an envoy and not just inside the beltway folk.

Q: OK, well then you got out of the — you finished the senior seminar when?

NAGY: Finished senior seminar in 1996 and I went off as ambassador to Guinea after doing a brief stint on a promotion panel.

Q: OK, so you went to — was it Guinea-Bissau or —

NAGY: No, no, no, no. Guinea, Guinea-Conakry.

Q: And you went there in '96.

NAGY: Yeah, I was ambassador to Guinea-Conakry from '96 to '99.

Q: All right, what was the situation there? First the sort of political-economic before we go into relations.

NAGY: Well, Guinea is endowed with some of the most bountiful natural resources anywhere, but they had a very sad history, first the dictatorship of S#kou Tour# who totally bankrupted and terrorized his own people. And then there was the long somewhat benign dictatorship of Lansana Cont#, who took over when S#kou Tour# died. But it — it was venal. It was — he was surrounded — even though he himself was, was the honest sort,

he was surrounded by kleptocrats and cronies. So it was — the country stank of corruption and the United States was quite tough on Cont# because he was an authoritarian — I don't want to say the word dictator — but he was an authoritarian president who certainly was not a democrat and had human rights issues, although again, not — you know, looking at the neighborhood it was by no means the worst place.

Q: Well, what were American interests there?

NAGY: Couple of — most of them were humanitarian because Guinea served as a point of refuge for Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees. At that time both Liberia was undergoing the scourge of civil war, and Sierra Leone had the Revolutionary United Front running around and chopping off people's arms and hands. So Guinea was the, was the point of hundreds of thousands of refugees from those countries. Then at the same time, we very much wanted to see Guinea become more democratic. And there were American companies who were there to tap into the natural resources, so we had to look after them. Guinea has about the world's — half the world's known deposits of bauxite. So there was a Pittsburgh company at the time and another American company involved in bauxite.

Q: How were they spending the money that they would get from —

NAGY: Oh, the country was highly corrupt. Cronies of the president were basically pocketing the money. Nothing was straight in Guinea. And when I got there relations between the U.S. and Guinea were extremely strained. My predecessor had taken it all very, you know, personally and he was quite — how do we say in diplomatice — frank in his conversations with his Guinean interloculars.

Q: Well, did you see this as a place maybe to have a different approach?

NAGY: Yeah. My approach — I'm not an in your face kind of person as much as, you know, I like to turn the battleship. I know you have to do it slowly. And I'm much, much

better at charm than I am at, you know, at wagging my finger. Not that I'm saying the other approach is wrong. It's just that my tactic is direction.

Q: Well —

NAGY: So I went out of my way to engage people, you know, to spend a lot of time talking to government folks. I made as good a friend as I could with the president, which really turned out — also, I did something which turned out really, really well. I traveled all over Guinea, and we paid to take a television crew with us so whenever I got back from one of those trips the news for the next week would be filled with the American ambassador, you know, traveling to various parts of the country, attending village ceremonies, meeting with local officials. And there were two points I — every speech I made — I started doing this in Guinea — every speech I made I would include two points: one, fathers keep your daughters in school because they'll make much better wives and they'll be much more valuable to you that way, and number two, please take HIV/AIDS seriously because it's going to kill you.

Q: How bad was it there?

NAGY: It was starting to get bad. It wasn't nearly as bad as in Southern Africa. I mean Guinea was a much more traditionalist society, heavily Islamic. But I found in visiting the various parts of Guinea the Muslim clergy to be extremely sympathetic. They didn't want their adherence being killed off by HIV/AIDS, and as a matter fact, northern part of Guinea, the most traditional part, we had Peace Corps volunteers, mostly young women, doing condom demonstrations with the full support of the local Imams.

Q: Oh!

NAGY: So it was — it was quite a paradox. And I loved my time in Guinea. Like I said, I made very good friends with the opposition, with the — with the pres — I mean the guy who this week was inaugurated as President of Guinea (Alpha Conde), he was an

opposition leader at the time when I was there, and he was arrested. And I organized the diplomatic core to ask the government to allow us to pay him a visit. And we went and visited him under house arrest and found out that he did not have even a pad of paper or a pencil. You know, he just sat there. So after our visit he was given paper, he was given pencils, he was given a radio to listen to, you know, BBC and whatever, and books to read. So I felt very good about that. Actually I think during my time we advanced the cause of democratization. And also one of the things I was very pleased with was I helped — during my time I was able to resolve like a 20-year dispute between Guinea and Mobile Oil.

Q: What was the problem?

NAGY: The former Guinean Government I think had kicked them out of the country and I went and, you know, made pitches and they let Mobile back in and I was able to bring internet into the country through the Leland Initiative, got some codeshare agreements for some American air carriers. You know, I found the positive engagement approach worked really, really well.

Q: What was the Leland Initiative?

NAGY: It was under — in honor of former U.S. Congressman, Mickey Leland, who was killed in Ethiopia visiting refugee camps. USAID helped African countries introduce internet.

Q: Well, were you there long enough to see any —

NAGY: Absolutely.

Q: — affect?

NAGY: We flipped the switch. Yeah. No, this is 1998, I think we flipped the switch. I was very, very pleased with that. And we even got it out to some of the provinces.

Q: Well, was the country like so many countries in that part, the northern part was Islamic and the southern part was —

NAGY: In Guinea most of the country was Islamic. There was a small part in the forest area which was predominantly Christian, but I would say that easily 85 to 90% of the population was Muslim. And you had three — you had basically three major ethnic groups and then a collection of smaller ethnic groups in the forest. But you know, in that part of Africa the Malinke, as they call them in Guinea, or the Mandingo, as they call them I think in, in Mali and Niger and they also are into Sierra Leone, parts of Liberia, and then across, you know, parts of Senegal, that ethnic group is there. And then the Fulani are also in the northern part of Guinea. There are quite a lot of Fulani. They call them the Peul. And then there's coastal — there's a coastal group, the Susu, who were the last to be Islamatized. And politics there was extremely ethnic, probably the most ethnic politics I've ever had to deal with.

Q: Well, how did this translate?

NAGY: Well, it translated with a lot of ethnic jealousies and it continued to this day, because the president, who was just elected, represents the Malinke and the president — and the candidate who was defeated represented the Fulani, the Peul. So unfortunately, you know, this has continued to this day.

Q: Well, could they get together?

NAGY: They did to a certain extent. I mean the armed forces, it was interesting because what the president did was in addition to his own ethnics in the armed forces he used a lot of the forest people who were mostly, like I said, Christian, because he didn't trust the two

large Islamic groups. So there was a lot of jockeying back and forth and different ministries represented by different ethnic groups.

Q: Well, how good access did you have?

NAGY: I had any access that I wanted. His second wife was my neighbor and whenever I needed to see the president I could always see him. The nice thing was when I left there they gave me a knighthood.

Q: Well, Sir Nagy (laughs).

NAGY: I was really pleased. I felt like I really accomplished my mission there.

Q: Well, what about the Peace Corps. I have pictures of these young Peace Corps girls with bananas explaining the use of condoms.

NAGY: Well, they actually had wooden models that were appropriate. That's what they used for the demonstration. But the Peace Corps was scattered throughout the country and I did my best to visit every single volunteer on site. I was very pleased because I got an award from Peace Corps, the Peace Corps director for the support that I gave the volunteers. And also, we started a new program in Guinea, which has gone on. We called it at the time Crisis Corps, which was, you know Peace Corps volunteers finish after two years but Peace Corps selected a very select group of very knowledgeable advanced volunteers for a third year in a crisis area. And in Guinea they would serve in the refugee camp doing things like counseling people who'd been traumatized and, you know, those types of things. And Peace Corps — they call it crisis Corps or by some other name, but it's a program that went on.

Q: Well, you talked about these refugees from Sierra Leone and Liberia. Then what happened to them?

NAGY: Well, you know those three countries — Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia — they, they seem to alternate having crises. And at any one point you can have refugees from two of the countries in a third country. So that's how — those refugees — Liberia was kind of settling down, so they were on the way back. Sierra Leone near the end of my time had gotten some modicum of peace. So they were starting to slowly going back into Sierra Leone. And then of course after I left Guinea itself blew up and then there was Guineans going other places. And right now all three countries are fairly settled down.

Q: How did Guinea blow up?

NAGY: Guinea was receiving — was actually being attacked by groups and the President of Liberia was supporting people who wanted to overthrow the government of Guinea. So then the government of Guinea armed a group of Liberians, who actually went in and overthrew Charles Taylor. Also rebels came across in Sierra Leone and basically destroyed one of Guinea's larger towns.

Q: Good God.

NAGY: So yeah, that was after I left.

Q: Well, would a Muslim country — were there influence I think of obviously Libya or of Saudi Arabia? Were they pumping money or —

NAGY: Not to such an extent because the president of Guinea was extremely sensitive to being told how to be a good Muslim. He even made public pronouncements about that. He was not going to have Arabs tell Africans how to be good Muslims.

Q: Did Guinea have much influence in sort of the greater African sphere or at least south — I mean —

NAGY: In ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States)?

Q: Yeah.

NAGY: ECOWAS? Not really. The — I think the Secretary General of ECOWAS was a Guinean so to that extent, yes, and also Guineans have served quite well in international peacekeeping. So in that regard the country more than pulled its weight. But the largest sphere for Guinea truly, and West Africa truly is the economic. And if they could realize their potential of the treasure house that they're sitting on it could be quite significant, including I think eight — if I remember — eight West African rivers have their source in the upland of Guineas. So they have tremendous potential for hydro.

Q: Were we trying to sort of pilot farming projects or anything there?

NAGY: We had — we had actually forest and road projects. I'm a true believer in rural roads, even though USAID, you know, went out of that business. And we were — when I first got there we were still doing rural roads, which I — which I absolutely loved. Also, we were doing some fairly innovative forest technique, as in proving that if a community owns a forest then they'll take care of it.

Q: How did you find your embassy?

NAGY: Well, OK, here's another part where I'm going to do a little bragging. When I got there we had the highest rate of curtailments of any embassy in the world and by the time I left we had the highest rate of extensions.

Q: OK, what was causing the curtailment?

NAGY: In addition to the very, very difficult operating environment I don't think it was a happy mission.

Q: How did you remedy this?

NAGY: Well, like I said I think one of my gifts — I spend my whole life trying to motivate people and improving morale and trying to make lemonade out of lemons. I started out as a GSO and then I was an admin officer the bread and butter issues are what matter to people, and if you supply them with electricity, get generators if the country doesn't supply, make sure there's a good health unit, make sure they take their vacations, get them furniture and furnishings, you know, consult with them on important decisions, make them feel like a family. Then you can overcome the environment.

Q: How were living conditions there?

NAGY: They were piss poor, to characterize it. I mean totally dilapidated infrastructure, horrendous local health conditions, 80 inches of rain a year, you know, over four months, electricity continuously going off, I mean continuously going off, you know, and on and on and on. It was a gorgeous country, especially if you got out of the city. The people were very, very nice. Lot of outdoor opportunities. We — the embassy, we ended up getting a boat from — that was seized by the DEA (Drug Enforcement Agency) from a major narcotics figure in Miami. So we could use the boat to go out to the islands and do fishing and do beach excursions.

Q: Well, the president when you were there was whom?

NAGY: Lansana Cont#.

Q: What was he like?

NAGY: Well, he was — basically — he was a farmer who ended up being a soldier who ended up being president. He was gruff, he was no nonsense. He didn't participate in chitchat. He — a lot of the diplomats sneered at him because he was not sophisticated and refined and he was one of the few people I think whose French was as bad as mine was, even though it was a Francophone country, so. So I enjoyed him. I enjoyed dealing with him and he really — one of the reasons I think that he liked me was because of my

wife. My wife grew up on a farm. So she was a farmer's daughter so they actually had an instant connection. As a matter fact, he helicoptered me only if my wife was along and he made us stop at his farm when we were going off somewhere else, and he let me use one of his helicopters with him. So he — like I said, I got along well with him knowing full well of course that, you know, he had very serious issues on the democracy and the human rights side and a lot of his cohorts were corrupt. But I definitely could do business with him. When I needed to get something done I could call on him.

Q: On the human rights side, you'd mentioned that you were able to make conditions a little bit better for his political rival, but what other things could — were we concerned about in human rights and what was being done?

NAGY: Our biggest concern, and they were not — you know, I think every one of my countries have horrendous human rights issues. Guinea was probably more than benign, but that was because his predecessor had been one of the worst African human rights abusers anywhere at any time, S#kou Tour#. So they were more sensitive to that. It was much more — it wasn't arresting people and pulling out their fingernails and lopping off their heads in the middle of the night. It was just that the environment was unfair to the pursuit of justice. I took — I took a number of cases, mostly having to do with the presidential guard. Because the presidential guard, also known as the, the beret rouge, the red berets, you know would run around town and arrest people and beat them up basically with impunity and I think during my time there they put a, you know, certain amount of kibosh on that. And then of course I was there during a periods of political evolution when the opposition was trying to raise its head and we had some demonstrations, we had some street violence. And there again, the — the opposition figures were allowed a certain amount of freedom. You know, they were — after elections they were not stashed and beaten up. And we got the current president, Alpha Cond#, you know, out of house arrest after a fairly short period of time. So it was — it was a situation that was gradually improving and you could actually look down the line and see that sooner or later they

would end up with largely fair and free elections, which the current round of election seems to have been.

Q: Was there — I mean were there Libyans mucking around there or not or —

NAGY: Not really. There was a fairly large and influential Lebanese community, and with all Lebanese communities they were split in their loyalties, and no doubt some of them were fundamentalists. But this was pre-9/11 so it was still a totally different environment. I mean we had terrorist concerns, but not to the extent that we get after 9/11.

Q: Now what about the military there?

NAGY: We had excellent contacts with the military. As a matter of fact, I brought in a JSET (special forces training) group to train some of their central forces on, on aggressive tactic because these guys, these poor military guys were kind of sitting in place and having the, the Sierra Leonean rebels come across the border and attack them. So you know, I'm not a military strategist, but I thought wouldn't it make more sense for the Guineans to be trained to go after the Sierra Leonean bad guys? So we brought in some Special Forces folk, and they had a phenomenal training experience. They even ended up doing a live fire final exercise, which scared me to death because I got to observe it and I stood with the Guinean High Command kind of overlooking the exercise area and I was really hoping that none of those soldiers wanted to shoot their milit — you know, their high command officer. Because I would have been dead.

Q: Well, did you get any visits from higher ups in Washington?

NAGY: Guinea wasn't on the list that much and it wasn't really that high on the assistant secretary's list. Our deputy assistant secretary was phenomenal. It was Vicki Huddleston. And you know, Vicki came out a number of times. We were — one of — one of her concern was our embassy at that point was extremely vulnerable to a terrorist attack because, you know, it was just as bad as the embassy in Nairobi that got blown up. But

we were in a much better situation because the Guinean security and intelligence services were fairly efficient and effective in keeping tabs on the bad guys. But aside from that, I really didn't have any high level visitors, unlike my next tour, Ethiopia, where I had them nonstop.

Q: Well then, you left there in what, '90 —

NAGY: I left there in '99, July of '99. And I was — and I was nominated to become ambassador to Ethiopia from there.

Q: Well, while you were still there President Clinton was going through his impeachment procedures. This must have been a very embarrassing time, wasn't it?

NAGY: Not really. I mean his impeachment didn't — the, the ill-fated election in, you know, the Bush/Gore one was a lot worse than —

Q: That was after you'd left.

NAGY: That was when I was in Ethiopia. So the Clinton impeachment didn't bother us at all because, you know, most of the time our colleagues there just couldn't understand what the big deal was. I mean every president had at least one mistress.

Q: Well, then so Ethiopia, how'd you feel about Ethiopia?

NAGY: Well, I was going back to Ethiopia because I had been administrative officer there in the mid '80s so it was a very emotional experience for me to go back as ambassador to a country where I had been as administrative officer. I always loved Ethiopia. My last time there was during the bad old communist days and I was going back to be ambassador to the group that kicked out the communists. But I was going back in an extremely troubling time because the year before Ethiopia and Eritrea had gone to war just about the time when President Clinton and Assistant Secretary Rice had named the presidents of Ethiopia and Eritrea as models for the new African leaders. So they — Eritrea attacked

Ethiopia and Susan Rice was very much trying to be evenhanded between the two countries, which outraged the Ethiopians because they felt very strongly that they had been the ones to attack, that they were in the right, and that the United States should be on their side on this conflict and not trying to be evenhanded. So I flew in to an extremely hostile environment, even more hostile than the one I found when I went into Guinea.

Q: You were there from —

NAGY: '99 to 2002. So I literally arrived with the two countries having massed hundreds of thousands of troops facing each other and it was the largest World War I style war since 1919 basically.

Q: Well, what was it all about?

NAGY: Well, what it was about basically was that Eritrea had a leader who, who felt like he was the one that kicked out the communists and that — Eritrea remember, seceded from Ethiopia with both countries agreeing to do that in 1993. So Eritrea became its own country and they felt like they were being unfairly treated by the Ethiopians. They had a minor boundary dispute. And the Eritrean president thought that the Ethiopian regime was much weaker than it was. I mean there's a lot of domestic politics that goes into this. But basically the Eritrean president thought that the Ethiopians were not happy with their regime, that because the Ethiopian president, Meles, came from northern part of Ethiopia, which spoke the same language as Eritrea did. So the Eritreans saw their enemy as the 4,000 — I mean the four million Tigrayans. They did not see their enemy as the 84 million Ethiopians. And in fact that's what they got. The Ethiopian Army had largely disbanded. They had sent their army south to the Somali border whereas the Eritreans kept their very, very large army. And the Eritreans thought that they could just march into Ethiopia and, and force the Ethiopian Government to accept, you know, a settlement along with what they wanted. In fact they found out very quickly that they bit off a heck of a lot more than they could chew, that the Ethiopians, even the militia in the area where they invaded the

militia stopped them, and then of course the Ethiopian giant, when it started reconstituted its forces, it could field an army much, much larger than what Eritrea had. And at the end, the Ethiopians were brilliant strategically because they used donkeys to cross the minefield, the Eritrean minefields and clear out the mines. And they could break through the Eritrean lines and Eritrea sued for peace when they were on the ropes. But like I said, it didn't help my case because I arrived in an extremely anti-American environment. And I also arrived in a country which was the number one interest of then Assistant Secretary Rice, Susan Rice. We worked very closely. The former national security advisor, Anthony Lake, Tony Lake, was involved in type of shuttle diplomacy, trying to bring peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Ambassador Holbrooke showed up at one point with the entire United Nations Security Council to try to help the peace process, which in my view they did not do, but you know. During my three years there I had the war, I had a potential famine, and I had September 11th.

Q: Good God.

NAGY: And all the while I was working, I was doing my best to, to warm our relations back up, which we did very, very quick. The relations went fairly well very quickly.

Q: Well, tell me, first place you're in East Africa and the — I would imagine that, the threat of what happened in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam would be hanging heavy on you, wouldn't it?

NAGY: Well, to a certain extent it was, but then again, the Ethiopians were the absolute best in intelligence and in counter-terrorism. They were extremely sensitive to Islamic terrorism, being the regime was mostly Highland Christian, even though the country was about 50/50. But the Highlanders, the orthodox were extremely sensitive to an Islamist threat. The security service was very effective, very efficient. They were fighting a handful of insurrections within the country. One of those was the Somalis and they'd had a long history with this. I felt very secure in Ethiopia. I mean my greater concerns, quite frankly,

were the government's total unhappiness with us, including the government organized a demonstration with us, which was extremely nasty and quite violent. But the — but the government protected us very well from any external threats.

Q: Well, did you see a righteous cause on either the Eritrean or the Ethiopian side on the war?

NAGY: Oh, they both saw the struggle as a righteous cause. And the war — let's see, I got there in '99. By late I believe 2000 the war had been basically settled when the Ethiopians broke the lines and the Eritreans had to sue for peace and they went back to status quo ante with the agreement then to survey the border and, you know, a number of things. And even today it still stands at the armistice line. So once that was resolved and our — Tony Lake did a phenomenal job of hanging in there, not taking insults personally. John Prendergast, Tony Lake, Gayle Smith, Susan Rice, you know, they followed this issue very, very closely and they managed to end up with a peace treaty, a document. And to this day I mean neither country really wants to resolve it. I mean Ethiopians would like to resolve it. The Eritreans are unwilling to resolve it. And that regime has become more and more troubling for us and for the region, you know, as the years have gone along. Because you know now they're providing weapons for the Somali Islamists. So that — the war passed and then just as the war was kind of wrapping up Ethiopia faced famine again and we were very quickly to respond to that, which further cemented our friendship. And then of course when September 11th came along then finally we became very, very close friends and partners in, you know, in combating the terrorists.

Q: Well, I'm just wondering, Susan Rice came out quite often, didn't she?

NAGY: She was out a couple of times. Tony Lake was out a number of times. I had members of Congress. It was so funny. I had a fairly large congressional delegation and I think Senator Kyle was there. It was a fairly large delegation and they went upcountry to see something and they put the Republicans in one helicopter and the Democrats in

another. And the one with the Republicans in it came close to crashing. I mean it was, you know, looking back on it — I could talk about it lightly but it came close to crashing but the helicopter pilot was quite good. It was a military — we rented copters from the military. And the one staffer, one congressional staffer was irate and I had to laugh because what he was most upset about. He said, “Do you know if that helicopter had crashed then that would have changed the balance of power in Congress?” He said, “From now on whenever we go anywhere we're going to make sure that we put both Democrats and Republicans in each helicopter.”

Q: (laughs) Oh, God. Oh boy. Well, did they make any — did anybody pay attention to them?

NAGY: Who, the Ethiopians?

Q: Ethiopians and Eritreans?

NAGY: You mean pay attention to our folk?

Q: Yeah.

NAGY: Well, they, they really — OK, the congressional people didn't start coming out until after the war ended.

Q: Ah.

NAGY: Susan and Gayle and Tony, yeah, they did. Because they sometimes would come out and shuttle back and forth between the capitals for a while and then go talk to the Algerians because the Algerian — Tony Lake was working with the President of Algeria, who was the OAU (Organization of Africa Unity) chair at the time, you know, to try to resolve this issue. So they worked very, very closely. And yeah, they, they maintained — I don't want — at that time it was not cordial, but they maintained civil relations with both sides. But like I said, what really resolved the problem was when the Ethiopians

just beat the Eritreans. And if they had wanted to they could have marched into Asmara. Prime Minister Meles was much too smart for that. Of all the heads of state I ever worked with, Prime Minister Meles was without a doubt the most brilliant, the most far sighted, the strategic thinker. Here was a man who had spent decades up in the mountains as a rebel. He left to join the rebels when he was a student and when he came out of the mountains and took over the country the world had totally changed. He had left to become a Marxist. Then when he came and took over power there were no Marxists left anywhere. So he had to do a quick change of his worldview, which he did to as much an extent as anybody came. And then he also enrolled himself in London's Open University I think by distance education. He got his master's degree. I mean the man was intellectually brilliant. It was a real pleasure working with him. And he also understood the problems of the country, but there were some fundamental aspects that he just — he just could not bring himself to bridging certain gaps. For example, he just could not accept the principle of private ownership of land. So Ethiopian farmers cannot own their land. Now they can lease it for long term, but they — you know, he just — he could not come to that point. He also had problems with the concept that food security does not necessarily equal food self-sufficiency. You know, food security comes from cash in people's pocket.

Q: Yeah.

NAGY: Not necessarily how much grain they can raise. We would go, you know, we would go around and around on a number of topics. What I would do on the advice of Irvin Hicks who was one of my predecessors, was I would often get books, academic types of books on topics that I really would like the prime minister to consider. And I would send them to him. And his ministers hated me because he would send the books around to people and make them read it, so. So I would order things like from the Conservative Book Club, which talked about privatizing water resources, things like that, because of course for Ethiopia the Nile is one of the biggest issues. You know, aside from the crisis of the day,

I mean one of their long term issues is they are the source of 80% of the Nile waters. Oh, and then you wanted to talk about September 11th.

Q: Yeah, but I'd like to talk a bit about the tribal make-up. How did Tigre fit in?

NAGY: You know, Ethiopia is the only country truly in Africa that was not a result of the Europeans standing around and carving up a map with imaginary lines.

Q: Yeah.

NAGY: Ethiopia is the only true country in Africa that's a result of history and geography. It was officially the second oldest Christian country, after Armenia, you know AD 350, whatever the Ethiopian emperor, Ezana, made it a Christian country. And it has been an empire. It's been a bureaucracy. It's a real state. I compare it very much to the Austro-Hungarian Empire or to the Ottoman Empire. It was a number of ethnic groups that were thrown together, but they lived more or less harmoniously under imperial edicts. Emperors throughout much of the history came from the Amhara ethnic group and then more recently at the Tigray, the Tigreans, who are in power, although ministers represent all ethnic groups. There's one large group, the Oromo, which is probably the majority of all of the groups and traditionally the Oromo have been kept out of power. So they have very strong self-perceived grievances, issues of inequality. This government has tried something which has never been tried in Africa, which I think in the long term might be a good models for other countries, and they call it ethnic federalism where they actually admit and recognize that there's an issue with ethnicity so they created the states more or less along ethnic lines, the regions, they're along ethnic lines. And a lot of power devolved through the states. So unlike most African countries, which were overly centralized, in Ethiopia the true power does lie in the center. But the stuff that people have to deal with on a day-to-day basis, you know, traffic or transportation or roads or education, the school system, medicine, divorce, personal disputes, those are handled at the locality or the state level. And those are handled in their own languages. There are a number of official

languages. English also is one of them. So whereas I had been in Ethiopia in the mid '80s the preferred language was Amharic, when I went back as ambassador the preferred language was English. Because Amharic when I went back the second time was seen as an imperialist language. So it was very interesting what they were doing and I really hope that this model works.

Q: Well, then turning to 9/11, where were you when this happened?

NAGY: Well, September 11th was Ethiopia's New Year's Day, September 11th, 2001. I was at home, because it was a holiday, and my deputy, Tom Hull, called me and said, "A plane has crashed into the World Trade Center." So I turn on the TV about the time to see the second one. And it was — it was so interesting because I started getting phone calls from every single member of the Ethiopian Government, including the prime minister, including the Ethiopian president, which is a ceremonial position, but all of my ambassadorial colleagues just expressing — expressing their support.

Couple of interesting things. I think that night or the next night there was a state dinner for the president of Djibouti. And I had received instructions to talk to Ethiopians about over flight clearances for our planes on a need basis. And I took the — at the state dinner I took the prime minister aside and I said, "Mr. Prime Minister, can — you know, I may be calling on you to give us over flight clearance for planes flying missions on a short term basis. You know, can you help us with that?"

And he said, "You know, you give us 10 minutes advanced notice and we'll get you clearance." So that was extremely supportive. I cannot even begin to say how supportive the Ethiopian Government was and the Ethiopian people. You're dealing with people who make $150 a year and they — they started bringing flowers to the embassy. And I had the marines put them around the flagpole and before we knew it this mound of flowers was inching its way up the flagpole. And these were not rich people bringing flowers, you know, these were taxi drivers, trades people, I mean everyday Ethiopians were bringing them.

The pope of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church — they have a good 40 million members — did a special mass for us and had me speak at the event. I mean it was just one thing after another after another just to show the tremendous support that they had for us in that — in that crisis. It was not easy being ambassador, you know, because in times of national tragedy someone needs to kind of keep it together and be the adult of the community, and I, I'm the — I had to do that. I had to, you know, do all the community together, do memorial service, be the guest of honor at the marine ball, you know, not much later, and just do a one on — one-hour one-on-one with Ethiopian Dan Rather, as they called him, you know, on a TV show. It was — it was professionally, personally extremely, extremely difficult time. Extremely. You know, just keeping that calm when you have a lot of people who want to panic.

Q: Well, did you have much contact with Pru Bushnell, our ambassador in Nairobi?

NAGY: I knew her, of course, and then also about a, a year after I retired I helped her with one of the sessions of the ambassador's training class, you know, Ambassadorial Charm School. She was the coordinator for that. So I helped her with a session of that. So, so I mean that — that's the extent that I know her, but of course we've had interactions. I think she was deputy assistant secretary and we had meetings and stuff like that. But mind me, my crisis wasn't anything like hers. Our embassy was just threatened; it was not actually blown up. But we had quite a large American community and like I said, it was not an easy time to be ambassador. Because Ethiopia of course was right in the, you know, it was on the target if it was not the bull's eye, because we were right next to Somalia. And of course a lot of the mess out of Somalia washed over us.

Q: How about Djibouti? How did that fit into the —

NAGY: Well, Djibouti was extremely important because Ethiopia is the world's largest land lock country. And Ethiopia desperately depended on the port of Djibouti. The president of Djibouti — think his name is Guelleh — he had grown up in Ethiopia and so he speaks

Amharic. And so Djibouti had a very complicated relations with Ethiopia because Ethiopia was the elephant and Djibouti was the grass, and Djibouti was very independent minded. But they also knew that — then they had a French, you know, they had French forces in Djibouti and then the United States takes Djibouti as a site of our African base. But the Djiboutian also knew that they could only twist Ethiopia's tail up to a point - or they could ignore Ethiopian interests only up to a point, because if Ethiopian's national survival was threatened by closing the port, Djibouti wouldn't last 10 seconds. And also there were a lot of Ethiopian ex-pats in Djibouti working in Djibouti, because you know the Djiboutians are amongst the highest consumers of Khat (or Chat) and in the afternoons most work there stops as people chew. So there are a lot of Ethiopians doing jobs in Djibouti.

Q: Yeah, well I'm — I'm just pondering now on this. Was there anything in Ethiopia that would constitute recruiting grounds for a Mahdi type thing or something?

NAGY: The big problem — like I said, half Ethiopia is Muslim. And the Wahhabi were growing fairly quickly amongst the Muslims, which was of great concern to the government. And of course these Wahhabi ventures were being sponsored right out of the cultural sections of certain embassies there. So the Ethiopians were in a very delicate situation because on the one hand they certainly appreciated assistance from, you know, all other countries. But on the other hand, they were extremely concerned and the Wahhabis were very smart because what they did was they often would purchase land close to water points and build a mosque there. And if someone converted to Wahhabism they could water their animals free of charge.

Q: Ohh.

NAGY: And if they were not Wahhabi, whether Christian or other kind of Muslims then they could not water their animals there. So they were — I forgot, my last year there, whether it was 56 such mosques or something that they built. I wish I could remember the number, but the thing was that while the immediate converts may have been economic converts,

you know, along with that would go the madrassas (Islamic schools) for the children and so —

Q: I would think the government could step in?

NAGY: Well, they eventually did. When I was there the government was really in a quandary as to how to deal with it. And they eventually did. But it shows you what happens. You know, the Ethiopians I have to say, it was at that point for me the most non-corrupt, the hardest working society I had ever been in contact with. Given the other countries in Africa, I mean the people were just having such a sense of honesty and dignity and hard work, you know, literally trying to raise a living from land that only contained rocks and were really more suitable for growing rocks than anything else. And — but they were dirt poor and famine continuously stalked the land. The years between famines kept getting shorter, largely probably because of — because of climate change. So they were desperately poor, and it took a while for the government to just realize well, this is not the kind of monetary assistance that we're going to tolerate. Religious relations were very delicate because traditionally in Ethiopia Muslims and Christians had gotten along phenomenally well. Ethiopia was the land where the prophet Mohammad had to send members of his clan — family when they were threatened on the Arabian peninsula early on. And the Ethiopian Christian emperor at the time gave refuge to Mohammad's family. So as a result — I know the Koran has some verses saying, you know, do not mistreat the Ethiopians. As a result you have even in mixed villages in Ethiopia you have Muslims and Christians would celebrate each other's holidays. These Wahabi were introducing a new tone, which the Ethiopians really did not want to see, because they understand the precarious future they would have if it became like Nigeria, you know, with religious distrust. And even though for the most part the lowlands are Muslim, the highlands are Christian, you know, you have a lot of cities with large Muslim minorities, you know, on the highland. So the government fully understands the delicate nature of that. And then you have certain of the Ethiopian ethnic groups, which are almost all Muslim, like the Ethiopian Somalis. And you know that in Somalia you have this force of

irredentism, which has a goal to bring all of the disparate segments of Somalia in other countries together under one flag.

Q: Yeah, the five points of the star.

NAGY: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. But I — I mean I loved Ethiopia. I think of all of my tours I feel a closer link to Ethiopia than I do to anyplace else. And for me — I'll tell you one of my — the most touching moments was a couple of weeks after 9/11 — well, let me go back to the Ethio-Eritrean War. After the war the border area where the fighting had taken place had been totally devastated. So I was talking to my aid director and we were trying to decide how, how we could do the most good to help them recover from the war. So we picked this one, one part of the border area called Irob. It was the district of Irob, which had been hit harder than any other part of Ethiopia. And when the Eritrean came across here they destroyed everything, including the churches. They raped as many of the women as they could. They destroyed the livestock, poisoned the wells. So we put I think significant funds in there, but we were going to rebuild — we were going to do housing, we were going to do water, we were going to do livestock, demining, everything, and we were going to cut the ribbon on the first project. And so I decided am I going to go up there? You know, it was really close to 9/11. Can I actually go out there? And I said, you know, the heck of it, I am going to go up there. And it was a real difficult place to be. I mean just fly and then drive and then up mountains and bounce around. And I got to the little village and we — we did very nice speeches and everything and then cut the ribbon, turned on that first well, and then my driver came up and said, “The elders would like to talk to you, Ambassador.” And I thought oh, my God, here it goes. Because I've been to so many of these things before where, you know, we do something and then afterwards the local people come with a list of things they still need to get done. So I thought here it goes, you know, I'm going to — they'll hand me a list of — they started speaking and I was kind of halfway paying attention, you know, to the interpreter. And instead of — instead of asking for anything, what they said was that, you know, we the people of Irob are so sorry as to what happened to you, the United States of — and we would like to help in any way

we can. Well, that really staggered me because here we are the richest, most powerful country one earth. And here they are probably amongst the most abused and mistreated people, you know, who had suffered unbelievably during the war in the occupation. And they were offering to help us. So it was kind of near the end of my tour and I was — and I thought oh, my gosh, you know, this — his all made it worthwhile for spending almost 25 years in Africa and having endured really miserable living conditions and, you know, putting my family through this. Because really the place had unbelievable dignity and you know, human interaction and human relationships, which are very difficult to find anywhere else.

Q: Well, where I'm talking now in Arlington there's a significant Ethiopian and Somali community.

NAGY: Oh yeah, absolutely.

Q: Was there any sort of back and forth between the American Ethiopians and the Ethiopian-Ethiopians?

NAGY: The American Ethiopians for a long time aided the government. I mean you had a lot of Ethiopians that came out during the communist days. And then you had some who came out before that and then you had some that came out after the current governance is over. And a lot of the Ethiopian community look at the current government as authoritarian because they — they strive in their heart for the days of the emperor having forgotten that those were not very good days either. You know, I was a member of the Hungarian Diaspora and I understand the mentality of exiles because you're always about 10 years behind the times.

Q: Yeah. That invariably happens.

NAGY: So I understand the frustration of the Ethiopian community, but I always — when I met with Ethiopians in America I always said go back and take a look and see what's

going on in your country because you will be amazed because you're caught in a time warp and look and see that yes, the current government is still authoritarian, but they're becoming less so. And the current government is the freest and most liberal government that Ethiopia has ever had in its 2,000 years of history, and the next one will be even better than this one, you know. So the community out here has their differences, but even they are mellowing somewhat. There are huge, huge numbers of Ethiopians. I think Dallas and Houston both have about 50,000 each. I think Washington area has probably a million. It's not — not a million, I'm sorry, several hundred thousand. They claim that there's more, but there's a lot of Ethiopians in the United States. And they do extremely well. You know, the first generation are the taxi drivers and then the next generation will be professionals. There are more Ethiopian doctors in Chicago than there are in Addis Ababa. That's why I didn't give visas to Ethiopian doctors. But that's another story.

Q: How did Kenya fit into this whole thing?

NAGY: Well, Johnny Carson was ambassador in Kenya when I was in Ethiopia and — (clears throat) excuse me — the Ethio-Kenyan frontier is kind of a no-man's land, though it really doesn't figure prominently to those two countries. It's much more abandoned and interethnic fighting and things like that, but not a major, you know, problem given the other problems that those countries have. Where we fit in with Kenya more was on the external side because we were both extremely interested on what was going on in Somalia. And we saw the Somali situation somewhat differently. I — I will admit to a certain amount of clientitis on my side because from the Ethiopian perspective Somalia was a huge sore spot and I often sent in advice to Washington on Somalia, which my dear friend and colleague in Nairobi would see differently. And the Ethiopians to a certain extent were supporting some of the warlords in Somalia, but of course we were too, off and on. So everybody had their, you know, their, their, their folks in Somalia that they, they supported and opposed. And of course for us Somalia had been a disaster.

Q: Well, when you were there how stood things between Somalia? This was before Somalia collapsed, wasn't it?

NAGY: No. No, this was after. Somalia collapsed I believe in '89.

Q: So you had Ethiopian —

NAGY: This was 10 years later.

Q: You had Ethiopian troops in Somalia?

NAGY: They would go in from time to time at that point. What they did was they had a client state more or less in Somaliland, you know, which wants to be independent.

Q: _____ and that?

NAGY: Yeah, and it's working really well. And so often the Somaliland president would come up to Ethiopia — I'm trying to remember the guy's name because I met him a couple of times — and also in between Somaliland and Southern Somalia was the semi-autonomous area called Puntland. Somaliland wanted independence. Puntland did not want independence, but Puntland wanted nothing to do with the rest of Somalia until they got their act together. So they were running their own affairs as well. The president of Puntland was a man named Abdullahi Yusuf who then became president of larger Somalia. He was an old security guy going way back. So Ethiopia told Somaliland that they would be happy to recognize them once someone else did. So they would not treat the president of Somaliland as a head of state, but almost. And the problem was with the poor Somaliland folks is they can never find anyone to recognize them first because there are a whole lot of countries that would be willing to recognize them after someone else has. Of course the Africa Union, for whatever reason, is bitterly opposed to Somaliland going off in its own direction, even though they will now likely welcome Southern Sudan, you know, as a new country and they welcomed Eritrea as a country.

Q: Well, then what about the Sudan?

NAGY: Well, the Ethiopians have had complicated relations with the Sudanese, but during the Independence War against the communist government of Mengistu, the Sudanese supported the Ethiopian rebels. Once they came into power the Ethiopians had problems with — certain problems with Sudan, but at the same time they also realized that they were neighbors and they had to get along. Now I think the Ethiopians will try to make it work when the Southern Sudanese vote for independence. But the real client support for South Sudan comes from Kenya. Much more so than Ethiopian. Ethiopia has a region in the west, which is inhabited by the same people as the Southern Sudanese, the Dinka and the Nuer. But these folks are always at each other's throats, the Dinka and the Nuer. So to a certain extent South Sudan is going to complicate things for the Ethiopians on their western border.

Q: Okay, today is December 7, 2010. Well, let's have at it. We can finish her off.

NAGY: Sure. I was thinking about what we talked about yesterday and let's see, we talked about the war, we talked — but I wanted to add one little something about an averted famine.

Q: Sure.

NAGY: In Ethiopia, is that OK?

Q: Oh, absolutely.

NAGY: OK. Because like I said, just as the Ethio-Eritrean War was winding down we heard rumblings that the rains had failed in the lowlands of Ethiopia. And myself having been there in the mid '80s during the great famine, you know, where millions were faced with starvations and 10s and thousands died, my AID director and I were both absolutely adamant to do everything possible to prevent it and keep it from happening again. So I

had my AID director charter an airplane and fly down to some of the riskiest parts of the country. You know, he literally risked — his name was Doug Sheldon — he risked life and limb to see firsthand what was going on. And he came back and in fact did confirm that the rains had failed and that considerable numbers of people were facing starvation. So we did not call it a famine because, you know, we were not into crises. But we called it a hung — an emerging hunger emergency. And working with all the emergency response agencies of the U.S. Government we were able to get massive grain shipments on the sea very, very quickly. So the first trucks out of the port of Djibouti to deliver food to the, to the affected areas arrived, you know, fairly quickly. I think like five, six weeks from the time we raised the alarm while the Europeans were still talking about it, you know. The trucks were already delivering American grain. And I was extremely proud of — of the U.S. Government response. So from my perspective Ethiopia was a very, very productive tour.

Q: Well, tell me, where did the grain come — I mean did we have this stuff on ships ready to go somewhere or what?

NAGY: No. No. It was a — I mean the Food for Peace Office, I think it was done through that, and the Foreign Disaster Assistance Office, Office of Foreign — you know, OFDA, that heart of USAID, or at least related with them. They knew exactly where the surplus grains were so I think they made very quick purchases. And it was — I remember I think the first shipment was put on a U.S. flagship in the port of Houston and hit the seas very quickly. And like I said, I went down to Djibouti. I flew down there to see the grain shipment arriving. And it was, you know, it makes one very proud to see the U.S. of America do very well that it can do very well. They did — it came out of the Midwest, it came out of Texas, you know, Louisiana, the usual grain belts.

Q: Well, I've heard that one of the big problems of Ethiopia is that it really doesn't have a good road system. So it —

NAGY: It does now. I mean when I was there in the, in the '80s it was atrocious. When I came back there in the late '90s, early 2000s it was much improved and the Chinese mostly — but there were some other international contractors were laying blacktop all over the country, and now it's — I'd say it's one of the better — maybe the best road system outside of Southern Africa. Of course Southern Africa has a wonderful road system.

Q: Question occurred to me before we leave there. What was your impression of Susan Rice and the AF (African Affairs) Bureau? Because she was very much involved with the war, wasn't she there?

NAGY: Oh, she was extreme — yeah. She was — for Susan, Ethiopia was her country of greatest interest. She had a lot invested, you know, both Ethiopia-Eritrea, with the leadership there, having identified both presidents of Eritrea and prime minister of Ethiopia as being among the youth type of African leaders who were bright, energetic, and cared about their people. So the war was a devastating personal blow to her. And honestly, you know, there were times when I definitely felt micromanaged. But once I gained her confidence, you know, that I was actually an adult and I could exercise adult supervision both over managing the mission and managing policy, you know, the straight bilateral policy, then she left me alone in that regard and she listened to my advice. She was very, very, very positive in my evaluation reports. And the, the bilateral — not bilateral, but the stuff between the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict without — with the OAU at that point, now AU (African Union) — and the Algerians was handled by Tony Lake who was the special envoy. So it, it worked out very well. I had an extremely positive working relationship with her and also with, with Gayle Smith who was the NSC director for Africa. And then in turn Susan was replaced by Walter Kansteiner again. I thought I had tremendous amount of support from Washington for what we were trying to do, because Walter was on, you know, with the September 11th and thereafter. Susan was there during the Ethio-Eritrean War and the hunger emergency. So I had my share of crises in each of them. But they were extremely supportive. I enjoyed it.

Q: All right, well then you left Ethiopia when?

NAGY: I left Ethiopia in July of 2002 for my final Foreign Service tour as the diplomat in residence at the University of Oklahoma.

Q: Now how did that come about?

NAGY: Well, actually it was uncertain what I would do afterward. There was a shot at another ambassadorship and also Walter wanted me to serve as one of his deputy assistant secretaries, you know, when I finished my tour. But I was delighted to have a set year at the University of Oklahoma working for Ed Perkins, the former director general of the Foreign Service and our first black ambassador to South Africa, who was there during the transition. Ed Perkins of course was a, you know, a very, very prestigious, impressive, brilliant diplomat, and I thoroughly enjoyed working for him in the university setting because he had retired by then and he was the — the executive director of the International Program Office at the University of Oklahoma, so I was attached to him as the diplomat in residence and I delighted in going around to all the colleges and universities in the South Central U.S. recruiting for the State Department, looking for historically underrepresented folks — in my case it was American Indians — and of course teaching about Africa. And it gave me a good introduction into university setting and I enjoyed it so much that when Texas Tech University offered me a job I decided to retire from the Foreign Service and move over to academia fulltime.

Q: Well, I would think the University of Oklahoma and the area around it would be a rather unlikely place to — one, to teach international relations and two, to recruit for the Foreign Service.

NAGY: Well, you have to remember, the president of the University of Oklahoma is former senator David Boren. David Boren as having been I think the head of the Foreign Intelligence Committee was extremely internationally oriented. University of Oklahoma

is very, very active internationally and just up the road is Oklahoma State, which was responsible right after World War II for creating the first U.S. style university in Ethiopia in cooperation between the emperor, Haile Selassie, and President Harry Truman.

Q: Ah-ha.

NAGY: So no, the Oklahoma institutions are extremely international because there's a huge petroleum and energy business in Oklahoma and of course the petroleum business is very global. So it was a wonderful place to, you know, to be doing that from. And of course it gave me an opportunity to visit all the small colleges and universities in an area that does not send many people to the Foreign Service, but they should send a lot more. You know, I mean it was certainly true that at one time our diplomats were mostly representatives of the East and West Coast elite, and the middle part of the country was overlooked. So it was wonderful, you know, trying to do a little bit to, to compensate for that.

Q: Yeah, the president of my organization, Association of Diplomatic Studies and Training, is Ken Brown from Oklahoma.

NAGY: Oh yeah. Ken I know very well because he was I think deputy assistant secretary in AF when I was deputy chief — DCM in Lom#.

Q: Yeah, he even has a Native American grandmother.

NAGY: Oh, yeah, that's great. And he did my job I believe for a while at Davidson.

Q: Yes, he did.

NAGY: Because when I was in the senior seminar I — we met him at Davidson when we visited Davidson. And so yeah, so that was a lot of fun. Like I said, it gave me the bug to stay in academia so I retired and now I do academic leadership sometimes.

Q: Well, what was your impression of the students you were getting?

NAGY: Oh, phenomenal. Very, very bright, interested, looking for opportunities to expand their hope, and definitely open to working globally.

Q: Well, you know one of the things that at one point, way back in the '70s I was with the Board of Examiners and we noted that in our recruitment efforts giving the oral exams that people who were outside of the orbit of particularly The New York Times and maybe Los Angeles Times, I mean, they might be bright interested, but they just didn't get much — this was obviously before the internet — but weren't getting an awful lot of international news.

NAGY: Yeah, and that can be true. But for example, even here I teach for the honors college and I did one — in addition, I teach on Africa every year, but I also did one year teaching on global issues. And what we did was we gave each of the kids in the class an “Economist” every week.

Q: Yeah.

NAGY: So I think that has changed and that there's a lot more interest. And now our campuses, even in the Mid- West, have been a lot more globalized. For example, we have here 31,000 students. And out of that we have about 1,800 international students from 100 countries.

Q: Yeah, and of course with the internet you can connect up very easily.

NAGY: Yeah. Oh, absolutely. Oh, absolutely. So no, it was — I found Oklahoma to be much more cosmopolitan than I ever would have thought, both Oklahoma City and Tulsa.

Q: Well, did you find in places that politics, particularly those dealing with international affairs intruded or was a lively source of discussion?

NAGY: You mean U.S. politics?

Q: Well, I mean the U.S. attitude towards international affairs.

NAGY: Not so much because most of those kids tend to be extremely patriotic. You know, it's like I was here at Texas Tech when I was an undergraduate and there was no protest of the Vietnam War. So these parts of the country the students are extremely pro-military, they are very supportive of the concepts of U.S. exceptionalism, they're a lot less likely to — they're no at all — they don't have the same amount of cynicism towards U.S. Foreign Policy as we would find on East Coast campuses.

Q: Yeah, well it's interesting. Were there any issues or areas of the world that particularly interested your students in Oklahoma?

NAGY: Well, the big thing is of course there's such a huge Indian population and one of the most interesting times I had was going up and making a courtesy call on the paramount chief of the Cherokee Nation who, you know, who said yeah, he will help me find American Indians to recruit, but he was thinking of putting together his own diplomatic service to represent the Cherokees overseas.

Q: Oh, my God.

NAGY: Because they are an independent nation.

Q: Mm-hmm.

NAGY: You know, to run their —

Q: Yeah.

NAGY: — the way they see fit. So that was, that was kind of startling to me, that there's still such a sense of separation between many of the Indians — American Indian tribes and, you know, their view of being a, quote unquote, “America.”

Q: Well, you were doing this at Oklahoma from when to when?

NAGY: I was at Oklahoma from July of 2002 to June of 2003 and I retired in June of 2003 and after a couple of weeks started my job at Texas Tech in Lubbock, Texas.

Q: How long have you been doing it?

NAGY: Since —

Q: I mean what were you concentrating on there?

NAGY: Well, they hired me to manage their international program. So I manage the same office here that Ed Perkins managed at OU (Oklahoma University) in Oklahoma and the whole idea is bringing more international students, sending more Texas Tech students abroad on a variety of programs, managing our university center in Seville, Spain, our university center in Quedlinburg, Germany doing international exchange agreements with the universities around the world and bringing international esteemed speakers here to the campus to speak here at our — at our international cultural center. And also putting up the internationally themed exhibit for the — for the Lubbock community.

Q: Is there a predominant group of foreign students coming to Texas Tech?

NAGY: Yeah, about — I'd say Indians represent about 40% and then the second highest, about 20% are Chinese, and then a drop down equally to Koreans and Nigerians and then you have a lot of other groups. But we're getting — we're getting more and more Saudis and we're getting more and more from other countries that are recently oil wealthy because we have a phenomenal engineering program here.

Q: Ah.

NAGY: So a lot of the — like the Kazakh oil company, the Equatoguinean oil company, even the Iranians, you know, want to send us their students. And then we're pioneers in wind science. We're the first university in the world to offer PhD in wind sciences. So you know, we're getting quite a lot of Chinese students who are wanting to gather wind technology. Then we're also way out there on cleaning up toxic environmental messes and full sciences, things like that, dry lands research, of course, and that's a huge deal in Africa now. You know, green revolution for Africa, how global climate change, how we're going to have to put up with more dryness and make the dry land more productive. So it's kind of neat to be on the cutting edge of a lot of areas like that.

Q: Oh yes, that must be fun.

NAGY: Yes, absolutely.

Q: OK, well what will happen now —

NAGY: Oh, let me just add one thing.

Q: Yes.

NAGY: Two of my — you know, we have triplets who were born in Zimbabwe. They were the first triplets born in independent Zimbabwe, and Robert Mugabe was not too happy about that. But I have two sons and one daughter. The two sons are now both in the State Department. Both of them are in DS (Diplomatic Security).

Q: Oh, that's wonderful.

NAGY: And my daughter's enjoying Monterey, California.

Q: What's she doing there?

NAGY: Her husband's model — does mathematical modeling for the U.S. Navy out there, and she works for a church and runs their program.

Q: Yeah, I spent a year at the Army Language School.

NAGY: Oh, it's a beautiful place.

Q: 1951, it's been a —

NAGY: Property, it's a $1,000 a square foot.

Q: Oh boy.

NAGY: So you know, it's amazing. So you know, we're trying to keep the Foreign Service family going so I was one, my dad was with USAID, and I was a Foreign Service person and now I have two sons that are doing it, so.

Q: Do you ever have any contact with Hungary?

NAGY: Oh yeah, I go back every year because my mom is still there, my, my half brother's still there, my half sister's still there, and we love Hungary.

Q: What's your impression of developments there?

NAGY: Well, I was very encouraged. Right after the curtain came down — and I'm very pessimistic — we had considered — we even bought property there because we considered retiring there, but they have unfortunately gone the way of corruption and cronyism and nepotism and I'm not at all optimistic. I'm afraid that they have a period to go through kind of like the African states did. And I hope that they can get out of that really quickly. But it's not a level playing field, there's not rule of law. There is an ugly under side to minority politics there, which is extremely racist and hate filled. You know, there it's towards the gypsies. So I'm not at all as happy about Hungary as I was before.

Q: Oh boy. Well I want to thank you for this interview.

End of interview